

Eating Dinner with a Fork, Spoon, and Knife: How a corps executed MACV's One War Strategy

**A Monograph
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Abstract

Eating Dinner with a Fork, Spoon, and Knife: How a corps executed MACV's One War Strategy by MAJ Richard K. Dembowski, III, U.S. Army, 67 pages.

During the Vietnam War and the years following, there has been a contentious debate regarding the nature of the conflict. Some proponents argue it was an insurgency while others claim it was a conventional war, with each side advocating the implementation of either a counterinsurgency or conventional strategy. Both sides are correct in their assessment because both an insurgency and a conventional war existed inside South Vietnam. When General Creighton Abrams took command of the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) following the 1968 Tet Offensive, he enacted a One War Strategy designed to combat both the insurgency and conventional war.

II Field Force-Vietnam executed the One War Strategy inside Military Region 3. From early 1969 until its departure in 1971, II Field Force conducted full spectrum operations. Its four lines of effort (advisor mission, combat operations, pacification, and Vietnamization) incorporated offensive, defensive, and stability tasks. During this period, the corps successfully secured Saigon, interdicted North Vietnamese Army units infiltrating into Military Region 3, destroyed the Viet Cong insurgency, trained the South Vietnamese Army's III Corps, and redeployed itself back to the United States. II Field Force successfully waged both a counterinsurgency and major combat operations inside South Vietnam's Military Region 3.

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Introduction: Can doctrine explain Vietnam?

In April 1975, Communist North Vietnam defeated South Vietnam, uniting Vietnam 30 years after the Geneva Accords provisionally partitioned it. During this period, the United States provided South Vietnam with financial aid, military equipment, and American combat forces to aid in its defense. Three decades after the fall of Saigon, a contentious debate remains about the war's nature. What type of war was it—conventional, insurgency, or something unique? Military professionals and historians struggle to answer this question while trying to glean lessons that are applicable for future conflicts. Doctrine captured some lessons from the war, but the debate clouds its context. Without the proper context, the Army may learn improper lessons that need correcting later.

The conflict began in 1960 when the National Liberation Front (NLF) formed and began an insurgency inside South Vietnam. The NLF, composed mostly of Communist South Vietnamese, was an extension of North Vietnam's Communist government. In 1965, the war became a mix of "both irregular and conventional forces" when North Vietnam introduced its conventional People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) to assist the southern insurgency.¹ Inside Military Region 3 (MR3), II Field Force-Vietnam assisted the South Vietnamese in waging both a counterinsurgency and major combat operations to defeat the multitude of threats it faced.²

Even though the contemporary concept did not reside verbatim in Vietnam-era doctrine, II Field Force executed full spectrum operations. The corps mixed offensive, defensive, and stability operations to conduct counterinsurgency and major combat operations simultaneously.

¹ John Gates, "People's War in Vietnam," *Journal of Military History* 54 (July 1990), 343.

² II Field Force-Vietnam was an American Corps Headquarters in Vietnam. To reduce confusion with ARVN Corps, MACV referred to this corps and its sister corps in Military Region 2 as field forces.

South Vietnam divided the country into four Corps Tactical Zones, with an ARVN corps assigned to each zone. In July 1970, the Corps Tactical Zones became Military Regions, but there were no changes in corps alignment. The regions progressed in numerical order from north to south, with Military Region 1 in the north astride the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and Military Region 4 in the south in the Mekong Delta.

When it withdrew in 1971, the corps successfully neutralized the Communist conventional threat and destroyed the insurgency in Military Region 3. By studying II Field Force's campaign, the Army can derive lessons about full spectrum operations that it may apply later.

II Field Force's campaign was an extension of Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV)'s One War Strategy. Instituted in 1968 after General Creighton Abrams assumed command of MACV from General William Westmoreland, the One War Strategy targeted both the insurgent and the conventional forces inside South Vietnam. In its 1969 Combined Strategic Objectives Plan, MACV provided strategic guidance to II Field Force and its other subordinate corps about the one war concept. To execute the strategy, II Field Force developed a campaign plan that combined offensive, defensive, and stability tasks to neutralize the North Vietnamese Army and destroy the NLF while simultaneously preparing the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) III Corps to assume more responsibility for internal and external security missions in Military Region 3.

What are full spectrum operations and did the concept exist in 1968?

II Field Force's execution of the One War Strategy is an early example of full spectrum operations because it had to "combine offensive, defensive, and stability...operations simultaneously," synchronizing its lethal and nonlethal activities to match conditions in Military Region 3.³ The Vietnam era version of full spectrum operations was flexible response. Flexible response was American policy designed to contain Russia's support to insurgencies, requiring the Army to build a capability to wage a variety of conflicts ranging from insurgency to nuclear war.⁴

³ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2008), 3-1.

⁴ Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1995), 71; Andrew Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 28.

In 1962, the Army published FM 100-5 *Field Service Regulations, Operations* to explain its role in flexible response.⁵ This manual introduced the “spectrum of war” to describe the “full range of forms conflict can take,” each with a different degree and type of “violence” associated with it.⁶ Written to provide military options short of nuclear war, the doctrine explained conflict moved across a spectrum from cold war (no use of military force) to general war (the unrestricted use of military power). Limited war was the “wide range of conflict” that bridged the two extremes.⁷ Disappearing in 1976, the concept reemerged in the 2001 edition of FM 3-0 *Operations* as the “spectrum of conflict.” Revised in 2008, FM 3-0 substituted cold war with stable peace at one end while retaining general war. Unstable peace and insurgency replaced limited war as the “intermediate levels” between the two poles.⁸ Conflict did not have to progress sequentially from stable peace to general war. It could “jump from one point on the spectrum to another,” creating conditions where one form of conflict spawned another.⁹ Consequently, Army units—whether in 1968 or in 2008—have to “operate effectively across the entire spectrum...in any area where conflict may occur.”¹⁰

The spectrum of conflict provides “a truer picture of the world than the simplistic concepts of war and peace.”¹¹ It is “a tool to understand and visualize” possible military operations associated with a conflict.¹² To describe “the character of the dominant major operations being conducted,” FM 3-0 categorizes these mission types into operational themes of

⁵ *On Strategy*, 68-69; Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*, 39.

⁶ Department of the Army, FM 100-5 *Field Service Manual, Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1962), 4-5.

⁷ Department of the Army, FM 100-5 *Field Service Manual, Operations* (1962), 5.

⁸ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 2-1.

⁹ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations*, 2-1.

¹⁰ Department of the Army, FM 100-5 *Field Service Manual, Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1968), 1-4.

¹¹ Summers, *On Strategy*, 68.

¹² Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 2-1.

peacetime military engagement, limited intervention, peace operations, irregular warfare, and major combat operations.¹³ Operational themes loosely correspond to a point along the spectrum of conflict, but they also overlap and “blur” with each other.¹⁴ FM 3-0 cites the existence of conventional battles between national armies in Vietnam in a “characterized counterinsurgency” as an example of blending operational themes.¹⁵ An insurgency and general war could exist simultaneously because “regardless of what words...describe the conflict,” there are “no clear breaks” between conflict types.¹⁶ Vietnam exhibited both irregular war and major combat operations characteristics.

While the “spectrum of war” accurately described Vietnam and Military Region 3, it was unable to articulate a solution. The 1962 FM 100-5 focused primarily on explaining the offensive and defensive aspects of general war—destroying an enemy conventional force.¹⁷ The 1968 version of FM 100-5 added stability operations or “internal defense and internal development,” using it as a “substitute” term for counterinsurgency.¹⁸ In a 1969 article, the Army Chief of Staff, General Westmoreland, explained that stability operations resided in the “lower spectrum of conflict” because they assisted countries in maintaining internal “security and order.”¹⁹ Counterinsurgency and stability operations were not classic military operations; the Army was

¹³ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 2-3 – 2-5.

¹⁴ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 2-13.

¹⁵ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 2-13.

¹⁶ Sam C. Holliday, “Terminology for the Spectrum of Conflict,” *U.S. Army War College Selected Readings, Course 4, Stability Operations* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, December 15, 1969), Combined Arms Research Library, Ft. Leavenworth, KS (hereafter referred to as CARL), 14.

¹⁷ Robert A. Doughty, *Leavenworth Paper 1, The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76*. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 2001), 25.

¹⁸ The term “counterinsurgency” was a joint term. Army doctrine used “internal defense and internal development” to describe the host-nation’s counterinsurgency program while “stability operations” describes the military aspects of counterinsurgency. Department of the Army, FM 100-5 *Operations* (1968), 13-1.

¹⁹ William Westmoreland, “Stability Operations,” *U.S. Army War College Selected Readings, Course 4, Stability Operations* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, December 15, 1969), CARL, 19.

uncomfortable in executing these cold war missions. The doctrine did not advocate integrating offensive, defensive, and stability operations; however, the 1966 Army Staff Report “A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam” (PROVN) did when it recommended MACV use a combined conventional and counterinsurgency strategy against the Communists.²⁰ The PROVN Study was promoting the use of full spectrum operations.

Recommending full spectrum operations is easy; implementing it is much harder. A commander’s cognitive understanding of where the operational environment falls on the spectrum of conflict and his characterization of the conflict determines the mix of offensive, defensive, and stability operations used. The combination and priority of operations adjusts to match changes in the environment.²¹ Commanders use lines of effort to sequence the combination of offensive, defensive, and stability tasks to “progress toward achieving the end state.”²² If more than one line of effort exists, some tasks will “produce effects across multiple lines of effort.”²³ The lines of effort are not permanent; commanders constantly tweak the sequence of operations used. Lines of effort did not exist in 1968 military doctrine; instead, commanders used strategic thrusts to sequence their operations.²⁴ II Field Force incorporated MACV’s strategic thrusts into its

²⁰ Andrew J. Birtle, “PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal” *Journal of Military History*, vol 72, no. 4 (October 2008), 1223.

²¹ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 2-3 – 2-5, 3-19 – 3-20.

²² Line of Effort: A line that links multiple tasks and missions using logic of purpose—cause and effect—to focus efforts toward establishing operational and strategic conditions. Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 6-13.

²³ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 6-13.

²⁴ Strategic Thrust: Power exerted in accordance with a strategy designed to move in a desired direction. The thrust may reduce the source of opposing political, economic, social, psychological and military power, or it may enhance allied powers. The statement of strategic thrust expresses the manner of achieving certain basic conditions essential to attainment of national objectives. The identification of major resources to be applied, and the relative priorities of effort are key factors which affect the strategic thrust. Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV), “Combined Strategic Objectives Plan,” January 1970, 11, Douglas Pike Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, (hereafter referred as Texas Tech), <http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu> (accessed October 1, 2008).

campaign plan, developing four lines of effort (ARVN advisor mission, combat operations, pacification, and Vietnamization) to guide its campaign for Military Region 3.

Can a study of II Field Force provide lessons for future use?

Years after the end of the war, many historians and military theorists debate the war's nature to explain why the United States lost. Dale Andrade cites the debate is between two "schools of thought," Clausewitzians and Hearts-and-Minders; both schools shoehorn their analysis to advocate either a conventional or a counterinsurgency strategy.²⁵ In a 1994 essay, Gary Hess defined Clausewitzians as former officers like Harry Summers and Bruce Palmer who use military theory to provide "a retrospective prescription for victory."²⁶ For them, the war was between nation-states; the insurgency was a sideshow. Clausewitzians blame America's political leadership for waging a limited counterinsurgency instead of a general war against North Vietnam; they argue America's role was to isolate South Vietnam from its external threats while the South Vietnamese military (RVNAF) neutralized the insurgency. The chosen strategy allowed the Communists to protract the war until they won.²⁷ After the war, the U.S. enacted the Clausewitzian lessons in the 1980s. The result was success in Desert Storm.

Former officers like David Hackworth, Andrew Krepinevich, John Nagl, and Lewis Sorley are in the Hearts-and-Minders camp. Hess claims these officers "fault" Westmoreland "for resisting and misapplying counterinsurgency doctrine" in his Attrition Strategy.²⁸ They argue the reliance on firepower and maneuver worked in World War II, but these tactics were not

²⁵ Dale Andrade, "Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol 19, no. 2, (June 2008), 146.

²⁶ Gary Hess, "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History*, vol 18, no. 2 (Spring, 1994), 241.

²⁷ Summers, *On Strategy*, 71-79, 173; Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 172-179; Andrade, "Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War," 146-147.

²⁸ Hess, "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War," 243.

appropriate for a counterinsurgency. The misapplication of tactics resulted in defeat. Sorley and Hackworth credit Abrams for changing MACV's operational theme to a one war concept, but other Hearts-and-Minders believe "there was no change" in strategy or tactics after 1968.²⁹ The Army rediscovered these authors after Iraq and Afghanistan became quagmires and applied their critiques into doctrine for use on these battlefields.

Has the U.S. Army squeezed everything from its experience in Vietnam? With the exception of Sorley's *A Better War* and Graham A. Cosmas' *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, neither school goes into great detail about the One War Strategy. Hearts-and-Minders focus on General Westmoreland's years in command from 1964 to 1968 while the Clausewitzians use two periods: 1965 to 1968 and 1972 to 1975. They both overlook the period from 1969 to 1971 when the One War Strategy came to fruition and was winning the war because it blurred the concepts of counterinsurgency and conventional war, creating an environment for a corps commander to execute full spectrum operations.

Even though the contemporary concept of full spectrum operations did not reside verbatim in Vietnam-era doctrine, II Field Force applied the concept in executing its operations in Military Region 3. The corps used offensive, defensive, and stability operations simultaneously to wage counterinsurgency and major combat operations. In order to understand the context of how II Field Force conducted full spectrum operations, it is important to understand Military Region 3's operational environment from 1969 to 1971. Without it, the danger becomes of "taking the wrong lessons" that may "color how and what we learn" for current missions.³⁰

²⁹ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 196 -205, 254-266; David Hackworth and Julie Sherman, *About Face* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 613 – 614; John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 168-180; Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 1-30.

³⁰ Andrade, "Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War," 175.

Designing the One War Strategy

Military Region 3 was a strategically important piece of geography in South Vietnam. Encompassing 11 provinces, it surrounded Saigon. Cambodia was its western boundary; 40 miles west of Saigon, a segment called the Parrot's Beak protruded like a spear into South Vietnam. The topography varies. The marshy deltas of the southwestern provinces are full of rice fields; a jungle stretches along the Cambodian border, and forested, rolling hills are in the north. The Saigon River flows south through the mangrove swamps near Saigon before it empties into the South China Sea. It was in this complex terrain that II Field Force and the Communists fought.³¹



³¹ Military History Branch, Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), *Command History: 1971* vol 1 (Saigon, SVN: MACV, 1972), IV-30 – IV-31.

***Dau Tranh*: A doctrine for full spectrum operation**

Military Region 3 had a history of supporting the Communists. Since Vietnam's partition, the Communists who elected to remain in South Vietnam set the groundwork for the upcoming war. They used *dau tranh* or "Struggle Movement" as a doctrine to guide their operations against the South Vietnamese government.

Dau tranh uses two forms, political and armed *dau tranh*, to influence three distinct groups: the enemy population, the Communist population, and the enemy military. It has three loosely defined stages: contention, equilibrium, and general counter-offensive. In the contention stage, political *dau tranh* is decisive as political cadres recruit a local guerrilla army from the population. When local guerrilla forces merge to form main force units of battalion size or greater, the second or equilibrium stage begins. Main force units conduct maneuver warfare, but avoid decisive battles while local insurgents and political cadres control the population. In the general counter-offensive, armed *dau tranh* becomes the decisive effort as main force units (both guerrilla and conventional) seek a decisive battle to establish conditions for the *khoi nghia*, or "General Uprising," when the people would revolt against the government. The *khoi nghia* was a key doctrinal concept designed to exploit anti-government sentiments; however, it occurred only once in Vietnamese history—during the 1945 August Revolution after Japanese rule collapsed.³²

Dau tranh allows the simultaneous use of both an insurgent and a conventional army to fight a protracted conflict that blurs insurgency and conventional war. It allows multiple transitions back and forth across all three stages; sometimes the stages "existed simultaneously," creating a mosaic pattern across the country.³³ The National Liberation Front and its military wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLAF) or Viet Cong (VC), were subordinate to the Central

³² Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1986), 218-219; Idem, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong* (Cambridge, MASS: The M.I.T. Press, 1969), 108-122.

³³ Gates, "People's War in Vietnam," 329.

Office of South Vietnam (COSVN)—North Vietnam’s military headquarters in South Vietnam.³⁴

The Viet Cong coordinated with PAVN leadership. Many times, they came under PAVN operational control. Vietnamese military history now acknowledges PAVN’s leadership of the southern insurgency, something it previously denied.³⁵ The Communists in Military Region 3 used *dau tranh* doctrine, adjusting it as needed to respond to the environment.

Beginning in 1960, the Communists steadily built a presence in the region. Throughout the war, North Vietnam infiltrated cadres, troops, and supplies south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to support their southern compatriots. Tay Ninh Province was the primary entry point for the North Vietnamese into Military Region 3. Gradually, the Viet Cong challenged ARVN and scored several victories, the most notable being at Ap Bac. South Vietnam was on the verge of collapse in 1964 when the North Vietnamese Politburo ordered a transition from a Revolutionary and Guerrilla War to a Stage 3 Regular Force War using the PAVN and Viet Cong units in the area. By 1965, the Communists threatened to control large swaths of Military Region 3 and unify Vietnam before American forces could arrive.³⁶

II Field Force’s initial operational plan

The U.S. deployed combat troops to Vietnam in 1965 to assist South Vietnam “to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression and attain an

³⁴ Michael Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA* (New York, NY: Ivy, 1992), 92.

³⁵ The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954 -1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 68; Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam*, 45.

³⁶ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1964), 82-96; Neal Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1988), 262-265; Andrade, “Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War,” 152; The Military Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 114-120, 137-138; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1991), 349-350; Douglas Pike, “Conduct of the Vietnam War: Strategic Factors, 1965-1968,” *Second Indochina War Symposium*, edited by John Schlight (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1986), 99; Jeffery Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (University of California: Berkley, 1972), 140.

independent South Vietnam.”³⁷ MACV stopped the PAVN offensive by the time it formed II Field Force-Vietnam in March 1966 as a corps headquarters to command American and Allied units in Military Region 3. The new corps had no command authority over ARVN units in MR3, only the authorization to coordinate operations with them. II Field Force mirrored MACV. The corps commander doubled as the senior military advisor to III ARVN Corps, with a Deputy Senior Advisor commanding the U.S. ARVN advisors. Meanwhile, MACV’s creation of the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) in 1967 gave the corps a civilian Deputy Commander for CORDS to execute pacification; he commanded the U.S. provincial and district government advisors. Headquartered at Long Binh, II Field Force executed MACV’s Attrition Strategy.³⁸

For the next three years, the corps played a cat and mouse game with the PAVN and Viet Cong. Major combat operations like ATTELBORO, JUNCTION CITY, and CEDAR FALLS could not completely eradicate Communist base areas and safe havens. Instead of fighting, the Communists broke contact to conserve combat power, returning only after the Americans left to reassume governance over the locals. Combat operations were the decisive effort in the Attrition Strategy; they established security for pacification operations by destroying Communist logistics nodes and troop concentrations. Without security, it was pointless to conduct pacification.³⁹ However, restrictions prevented II Field Force from pursuing the enemy into Cambodia or

³⁷ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1976), 57,

³⁸ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 155; Jeffrey J. Clark, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1988), 56-57, 184-187; George S. Eckhardt, *Command and Control: 1950-1969* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), 51-54, 59-60, 64-67; Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, 50-57; Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2006), 288-290, 357-364; Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), *Handbook for Military Support to Pacification*, February 1968, 26-33, CARL; Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1977), 56-74; Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 165.

³⁹ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA*, 202-210; Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, 57-59; Andrade, “Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War,” 161; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation*, 397-405; Birtle, “PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal,” 1220-1222.

attacking sanctuaries there.⁴⁰ The game changed when the Communists launched their 1967-1968 Winter-Spring Campaign.

The 1967-1968 Winter-Spring Campaign, also called the Tet Offensive, had two purposes: create the *khoi nghia* and defeat American political will. The campaign's highpoint was the VC attacks on South Vietnam's major urban areas on 30-31 January 1968. While intelligence predicted the offensive, its timing and ferocity was a surprise. However, the *khoi nghia* never materialized as II Field Force and III ARVN Corps defeated the attacks and crippled the insurgency in MR3 by capturing or killing a majority of the attackers. The tactical defeat forced the Communists to return to guerrilla warfare to protract the conflict, allowing them time to infiltrate replacements and supplies for decimated PAVN and Viet Cong units.⁴¹

After Tet, II Field Force continued to execute the Attrition Strategy until the publication of the One War Strategy in 1969.⁴² Communist losses created conditions for MACV to place pacification on par with combat operations. When General Abrams assumed command of MACV in July 1968, he directed a reevaluation of the Attrition Strategy. The result was a "one war

⁴⁰ In 1968, the U.S. Army doctrine defined Base Areas, Safe Havens and Sanctuaries as:

Base Area: An area, populated or unpopulated, that contains structures, installations, and other facilities or resources fused in the direct support of insurgent operational units. It could be a logistic supply base, a command center, or the focal point for the reorganization, training, staging, and rest of insurgent units. Base areas include base camps, safe havens, and sanctuaries.

Safe Haven: A relatively secure area, internal to the country or region of conflict, which is primarily a refuge for the insurgent organization.

Sanctuary: An area, external to the country or region of conflict that provides refuge from military actions due to certain political constraints. United States Army Combat Developments Command, "Chapter 1 Exploitation of the Insurgent Base Area System," Refining the Army's Role in Stability Operations (REARM-STABILITY), 29 August 1968, 1, CARL.

⁴¹ Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2007), 29-41; Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946 - 1975*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 478; Military History Branch, Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), *Command History: 1968* vol 2 (Saigon, SVN: MACV, 1969), 881-882; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 323-328; The Military Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 227-233, 248-250; Pike, *War, Peace and the Viet Cong*, 127-133, 142-147; Idem, "Conduct of the Vietnam War: Strategic Factors, 1965-1968," 99.

⁴² Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 137; Andrade, "Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War," 165-166.

concept that does not recognize a separate war of big battalions, war of pacification, or war of territorial security,” but would “carry the battle to the enemy simultaneously, in all areas of conflict.”⁴³ Abrams redefined the conflict using full-spectrum terms, requiring MACV to adjust its strategy with the publication of the 1969 Combined Strategic Objectives Plan.

Abrams’ Combined Strategic Objectives Plan

Tet was a turning point; South Vietnam had the opportunity to defeat the Viet Cong internal threat before it reconstituted. In August 1968, MACV’s Long Range Planning Group began to develop the One War Strategy. The plan retained much of the Attrition Strategy, but also incorporated ideas from the 1966 PROVN study. Fittingly, the planning group leader, LTC Donald Marshall, also authored the PROVN study. The difference between the Attrition Strategy and the One War Strategy was that combat operations and pacification were now equally important. The enemy threat determined which effort had the higher priority.⁴⁴

A wrinkle emerged during the planning process. While Tet was an operational failure for the Communists, it was a strategic victory for them as the pendulum of Washington’s political environment swung in Hanoi’s favor. In Tet’s wake, President Lyndon Johnson ceased bombing North Vietnam and began negotiations to end the conflict. Because of worldwide commitments and the deployment of parts of the Strategic Reserve to MACV, future troop deployments would not occur. These actions signaled to both Hanoi and MACV that the United States had a finite time to attain its strategic objective of “a free, independent community of nations [in Southeast

⁴³ United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), “Commander’s Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan,” 1969, 22-23, Douglas Pike Collection, Texas Tech, <http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu> (accessed October 1, 2008).

⁴⁴ Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 233; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 133-136; Birtle, “PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal,” 1227.

Asia], living at peace with one another.”⁴⁵ Waning public support prompted both political parties to believe “the war was just about over” and advocate America’s withdrawal from Vietnam.⁴⁶ Planners assumed the American troop withdrawals would begin soon. The assumption became fact when President Nixon announced his Vietnamization policy that would “schedule” troop withdrawals as the South Vietnamese military “became strong enough to defend” their country.⁴⁷

A timeline emerged from Vietnamization’s time and resource constraints. Using April 1969 as a start point, the team drafted three milestones—the immediate, intermediate, and ultimate objectives.⁴⁸ The immediate objective was to create a secure environment in critical geographic areas by 30 June 1970 where South Vietnam could safely build a governance capability. Troop withdrawals would begin shortly thereafter. The intermediate objective expanded the secure area to cover all of South Vietnam by 30 June 1972 to protect Vietnamese governmental and economic development.⁴⁹ The years 1970 and 1972 were objective targets because of the American election cycle. Planners assumed “widespread disillusionment” would

⁴⁵ United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), “Long Range Planning Task Group Briefing Given to COMUSMACV on 20 November 1968,” 2, Vietnam Archive Collection, Texas Tech, <http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu> (accessed October 1, 2008).

⁴⁶ MACV, “Commander's Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan,” 1969, 29.

⁴⁷ Address by President Richard Nixon, November 3, 1969, Gareth Porter, ed, *Vietnam a History in Documents*, (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1981), 386; Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 219-220.

⁴⁸ In its Combined Strategic Objectives Plan, MACV included a section entitled Principal Strategic Concept Definitions. In this section, MACV defined immediate, intermediate, and ultimate objectives as:

Ultimate Objective: The overall situation to be achieved; a strategic position to be attained, or fundamental end condition that is sought, toward which policy is directed and the national efforts and resources applied. A national objective should be a condition that can be achieved within the limits of the present and future resources available, and within limits of national power and will to employ it.

Intermediate Objective: A specific goal; that desired degree of success to be brought about in a time frame less than required to achieve an overall or national objective, but greater than required to achieve an immediate objective. Success in gaining the overall objective is contingent on the accomplishment of these specific goals.

Immediate Objective: The nearest or closest goal to be accomplished in a limited time frame. Successful accomplishment is essential to attaining the intermediate goals and national objectives. MACV, “Combined Strategic Objective Campaign Plan,” January 1970, 10.

⁴⁹ MACV, “Commander's Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan,” 1969, 17.

cause Congress to reduce MACV's "financial and personnel resources," with "the termination of significant military resources" occurring before the 1972 presidential election.⁵⁰ Despite the withdrawal of combat troops, planners concluded the advisor mission needed to continue at least until 1977; otherwise, the ultimate objective of "a free, independent, and viable nation of South Vietnam" was in jeopardy.⁵¹

Three strategic thrusts emerged from the planning process. The strategic thrusts, what are now doctrinally called lines of effort, were: 1.) combat operations to destroy the PAVN and PLAF, 2.) create a secure environment so the South Vietnamese government could expand its influence, and 3.) integrate "security, political, economic, social and psychological programs" into government nation-building operations.⁵² Each thrust had sub-thrusts, or tasks, that were critical to achieve each objective. (See Appendix 1) Prior to 1968, MACV executed these strategic thrusts simultaneously, but combat operations were the decisive effort and received the bulk of the resources. This changed in 1969 when the Combined Strategic Objectives Plan gave all three thrusts equal priority. To delineate the priority strategic thrust, planners created the Area Security System. Divided into four geographic classifications (Secure Area, Consolidation Zone, Clearing Zone, and Border Surveillance Zone), the Area Security System would gradually transition security responsibilities to ARVN while improving South Vietnam's governance capacity at the same time.⁵³

⁵⁰ MACV, "Combined Strategic Objectives Plan," 1970, 65

⁵¹ MACV, "Combined Strategic Objective Campaign Plan," 1970, 71; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 136-137.

⁵² MACV, "Commander's Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan," 1969, 22 (quote); MACV, "Combined Strategic Objectives Plan," 1970, 94-106; Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 212; Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 236.

⁵³ Lewis Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 201-202 (quote); MACV, "Commander's Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan," 1969, 21-26; MACV, "1970 Combined Strategic Objectives Plan," 1970, 73-87; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 137.

The Area Security System assigned responsibility “for providing security for the populace in the area concerned, not to the defense of the geographic area itself.”⁵⁴ An area’s security status determined the priority strategic thrust, the lead organization, and the resources provided. Provincial governments and national police were the lead agencies in Secure Areas and Consolidation Zones because the Viet Cong threat was non-existent or reduced to manageable levels. The ARVN Corps commander, who doubled as the Military Region Commander, commanded the Clearing and Border Surveillance Zones that provided a protective shield around the Secure Areas. The provincial governments still provided government administration, but the ARVN commander, in conjunction with American corps, used military force “against enemy main force units and base areas.”⁵⁵ As the PAVN and Viet Cong internal threat decreased, the provincial government would assume responsibility for the area and form a Consolidation Zone to destroy the surviving Viet Cong political infrastructure.

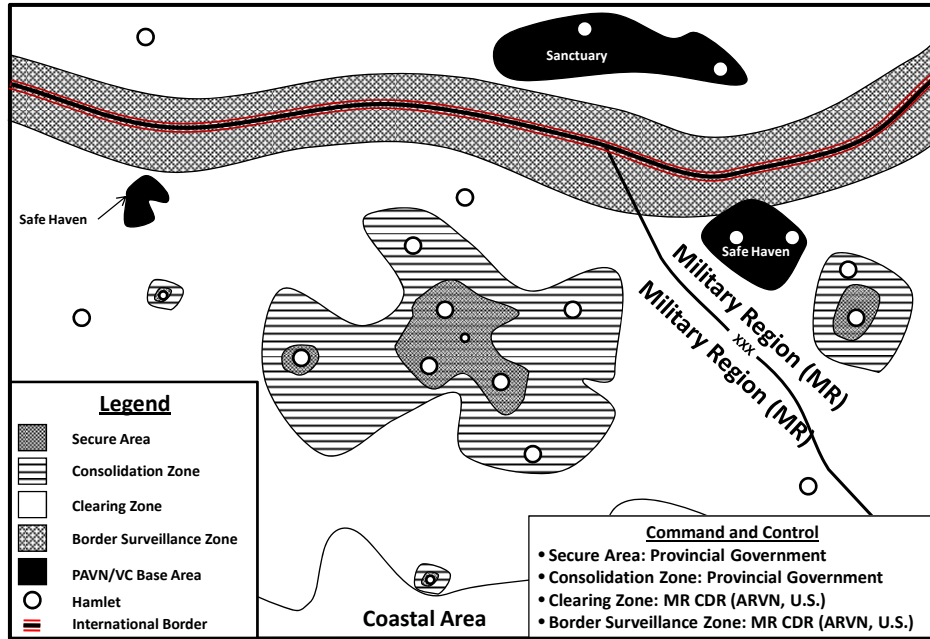
The Border Surveillance Zone served as the front line defense against a potential conventional PAVN invasion. As long as Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries remained, an armed force would patrol the Border Surveillance Zone to monitor and interdict enemy movement across the international border. When possible, ARVN would conduct cross border raids to neutralize a PAVN force before it crossed into South Vietnam. The Area Security System allowed MACV and ARVN to execute a counterinsurgency against the Viet Cong while simultaneously conducting major combat operations to destroy Communist conventional military forces. These operations allowed MACV to prepare ARVN to continue after MACV withdrew and American support dried up.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ LTC Marshall, 12 June 1969 Commander’s Conference, Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 203.

⁵⁵ MACV, “Commander’s Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan,” 1969, 26.

⁵⁶ MACV, “Commander’s Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan,” 1969, 23-28; MACV, “1970 Combined Strategic Objectives Plan,” 1970, 73-87, 151-167; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 136-139; Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 201-209; Andrade, “Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War,” 170.

Area Security System



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The Area Security System was not a novel idea, but a modification of the British “oil-spot” concept used in Malaysia. It integrated American and Vietnamese security forces to root out remnants of the Viet Cong Infrastructure while securing the Vietnamese government and citizens from reprisals. CORDS advisors mentored Vietnamese government officials in pacification while MACV and ARVN conducted combat operations to interdict PAVN movement and locate Viet Cong base areas in the countryside. While the tone and type of operations were not a radical change from the Attrition Strategy, the metrics for success were. The body count disappeared, replaced by the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). CORDS advisors submitted environmental data (e.g. terrorist attacks, Communist political infrastructure, population attitudes, capacity development, and collateral damage) on assigned hamlets; each hamlet received a security grade of A, B, C, D, E, or VC. An “A” meant the hamlet was secure while a “VC” was Communist controlled. The HES ratings measured pacification’s progress, providing analysis to determine an area’s security classification. Theoretically, Secure Areas were non-contiguous because

⁵⁷ MACV, “Combined Strategic Objectives Plan,” 1970, 81.

neighboring hamlets could have different security grades. As conditions improved or declined, the HES ratings would reflect the changes in the operational environment. The goal for the Area Security System was for secure oil spots to converge, eventually covering the entire country.⁵⁸

The Combined Strategic Objectives Plan was a full-spectrum concept; the three strategic thrusts relied on offensive, defensive, and stability operations. When Marshall briefed the plan to the corps commanders in June 1969, his harshest critic was the II Field Force Commander, LTG Julian Ewell.⁵⁹ Like his fellow corps commanders, Ewell feared the South Vietnamese would abandon the One War Strategy by focusing on PAVN and miss the “local guerrillas running around right outside the compound.”⁶⁰ General Abrams assured Ewell the new “philosophy” was proper, it would help South Vietnam “to really make it” once the U.S departed by targeting both the external conventional and internal insurgent threats to South Vietnam.⁶¹

With the new strategy in hand, each American corps (XXIV Corps, I Field Force, and II Field Force) developed campaign plans to achieve the immediate and intermediate objectives as scheduled in their Military Regions. Each corps had its own set of difficulties, but II Field Force had the unique challenge to defend Saigon from both Viet Cong elements in the country and PAVN forces located 40 miles away in Cambodia.

Translating the strategy into a corps campaign plan

II Field Force’s combat strength peaked in 1969 with the equivalent of five U.S. divisions, a Thai division, and an Australian regimental task force in its task organization. The corps provided military advisors to five ARVN divisions and CORDS advisors to eleven

⁵⁸ Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 214-216; Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 205-209; MACV, “1970 Combined Strategic Objectives Plan,” 1970, 73-87, 151-167; Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, 106-108.

⁵⁹ Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 201-209; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 613-614; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 138-139.

⁶⁰ LTG Ewell, Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 206-207

⁶¹ GEN Abrams, Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 206-207.

provincial governments—including Saigon’s Capital Military District—inside Military Region 3. When LTG Ewell assumed command in April 1969, II Field Force was completing its Toan Thang, “Complete Victory,” Campaign that interdicted enemy movement and stopped daily rocket attacks into Saigon. As part of the campaign, the corps realigned itself to fashion a defensive ring around Saigon. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the 25th Infantry Division, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the ARVN Airborne Division and the 25th ARVN Division operated in the western provinces that butted against the Cambodian border. The 1st Infantry Division, 3rd Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division, the 199th Infantry Brigade, and the 5th ARVN Division had the interior provinces bordering the Capital Military District (CMD) while the 3rd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division was inside the CMD. The 1st Australian Task Force and the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Force owned the coastal provinces. This defensive layout secured Saigon, setting the groundwork for II Field Force to execute the One War Strategy in Military Region 3.⁶²

II Field Force-Vietnam’s mission was “to conduct operations with U.S. and Free World Forces, in conjunction with Vietnamese forces, against the totality of the enemy’s military, political, and economic effort in Military Region 3; to assist the Vietnamese in strengthening their armed forces; and to assist in maintaining internal security by participating in the pacification

⁶² Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 31 April 1969*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1969) CARL, 24-34; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 31 July 1969*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1969), 19-28, CARL; Military History Branch, Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), *Command History: 1969* vol 1 (Saigon, SVN: MACV, 1970), V-81, V-94 - V-96; Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History: 1968* vol 1 (Saigon, SVN: MACV, 1969), 392-393; George W. Dickerson, *Senior Officer Debriefing Report: BG George W. Dickerson, CG, 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, Period 11 December 1968 through 11 December 1969*, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1970), 3, CARL; James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam : How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 54.

effort.”⁶³ The corps’ four key “sub-missions,” now known as lines of effort, were the ARVN advisor mission, combat operations, pacification, and Vietnamization. Vietnamization was not in the Corps mission statement because MACV assigned it as a specified task later in 1969.⁶⁴

II Field Force designed its campaign plan to attack “all of the elements of the enemy system.”⁶⁵ A mixture of conventional and guerrilla warfare existed simultaneously in MR3; each division or separate brigade combat team fought a conventional or guerrilla threat in their areas of operation (AO), sometimes they fought both. Along the Cambodian border, conventional PAVN divisions dominated, while PAVN regiments and under strength VC units conducted guerrilla warfare in the interior provinces. Not enough combat troops were present to maintain constant pressure on the Communists everywhere. To mitigate risk, the corps focused its resources along the lines of effort. Combat operations and pacification complemented each other to defeat the Viet Cong in the interior provinces while interdicting PAVN and VC forces and logistics infiltrating from Cambodia so “they could not interfere with pacification.”⁶⁶ To progress along the ARVN advisor mission line of effort, the corps integrated III ARVN Corps into its combat operations, assisting its advisors to train the ARVN. Meanwhile, the corps’ CORDS advisors mentored the local South Vietnamese governments to establish security with territorial forces, enact government reforms, and develop the local economy. Begun in late 1969, Vietnamization was not a stand-alone line of effort, but encompassed the other three lines of effort. It required positive advancement along the lines of effort before transitioning war-fighting responsibilities to

⁶³ Michael S. Davison, “Debriefing Report: Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, Commanding General, II Field Force Vietnam and Third Regional Assistance Command, 15 April 1970 - 26 May 1971,” (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1971), 3.

⁶⁴ Julian J. Ewell, “Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam,” Senior Officer Debriefing Report, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1970), CARL, 2.

⁶⁵ Julian J. Ewell and Ira A. Hunt, Jr, *Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgment*, (Washington, D.C., Center for Military History, 1974), 196.

⁶⁶ Ewell and Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, 198

III ARVN Corps. Only then could troop withdrawals occur. When LTG Michael Davison assumed command in 1970, II Field Force was synchronizing Vietnamization's withdrawal plan into its operations.⁶⁷



II Field Force's campaign plan used lines of effort to synchronize its offensive, defensive, and stability operations. The corps had to constantly "fine tune" the plan because the lines of effort were "only a general guide."⁶⁸ The tactics and resources needed to execute the campaign plan constantly adjusted to environmental conditions, allowing II Field Force to "double team the Communists with a combination of military pressure and a strong pacification effort" until May 1971 when it gave the South Vietnamese responsibility for Military Region 3 and withdrew.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Davison, "Debriefing Report," 4.

⁶⁸ Ewell, "Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam," 3, 2.

⁶⁹ Ewell, "Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam," 6.

Working yourself out of a job, the ARVN Advisor Mission

If South Vietnam was to thrive as a country following American withdrawal, its army had to be capable of defending the country from both its internal and external threats. If it could not, then the U.S. could not attain its strategic objectives. II Field Force's ARVN Advisor Mission was responsible for preparing III ARVN Corps for life on its own in Military Region 3. II Field Force's ARVN advisors and combat units played an essential role in executing this line of effort.

Combat Assistance Teams

In January 1969, MACV created the Combat Assistance Team (CAT) to reduce the personnel on ARVN division advisor teams. They retained the traditional advisor role of a coach, a teacher, and a mentor to their ARVN counterparts, but now had the ability to coordinate for American combat support (indirect fires, close air support, helicopter support, and access to American intelligence). Assigned to an American corps, the CATs worked only with ARVN corps, divisions, regiments, and battalions; CORDS advisors trained the territorial forces (Regional Forces (RF), Popular Forces (PF), and national police).⁷⁰

CAT members served 12-month tours; their mission was "working themselves out of a job."⁷¹ Taught at Fort Bragg both training techniques and the Vietnamese language, they were a valuable part of training ARVN units on American tactics and equipment. However, the CATs had no command authority. They relied on tact and charisma to influence and motivate their ARVN counterparts to perform. Even though the advisor mission was important, it had a stigma

⁷⁰ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 368-373; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 34-35; Cao Van Vien, et al, *U.S. Advisor*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1980), 49.

Regional Forces (RF): Military forces recruited and employed within a province and later within a military region. The RVNAF primarily organized Regional Force units into companies.

Popular Forces (PF): Military forces recruited and employed within a district. The RVNAF primarily organized Popular Force units into platoons. Tho, *Pacification*, 218.

⁷¹ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 368.

associated with it. American combat leaders viewed advisory duty as a lesser important mission than being in a combat unit. In spite of the stigma, the CATs' performance was exemplarily as III ARVN Corps became "progressively more effective," but there was "an urgent need to develop within ARVN units a level of technical proficiency nearer to that of U.S. units."⁷²

***Dong Tien*: Combined operations as a training tool**

Begun in June 1969, the *Dong Tien* (Progress Together) program "married up" U.S. and ARVN units for combined combat operations in Military Region 3 as a means to train III ARVN Corps.⁷³ The program was a springboard for ARVN "to take over the ground combat role" in Military Region 3.⁷⁴

Using combined operations as a training tool was not a new concept. In 1966, II Field Force did a "buddy" program between ARVN and American divisions, but abandoned it when combat operations became more intense. By 1969, III ARVN Corps' divisions—5th, 18th, and 25th ARVN divisions—were the worst in South Vietnam. Ewell and the III ARVN Corps commander, General Do Cao Tri, had to improve their performance quickly. Using I Field Force's "Paired Up" program as a model, Ewell tasked his combat divisions and separate brigade combat teams to train the Vietnamese army and territorial forces in their areas of operations. At the corps level, II Field Force and III ARVN Corps commanders were co-commanders for Military Region 3 while the 1st Infantry Division, 25th Infantry Division, and the 199th Infantry Brigade paired with the 5th, 25th, and 18th ARVN Divisions respectively, creating combined areas of operations. In October, the ARVN Airborne Division began a *Dong Tien* relationship with the 1st Cavalry Division

⁷² Carlton Preer, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report: Deputy Senior Advisor, III Corps and III Corps Tactical Zone, Period 1 May 1969 to 30 November 1969," Senior Officer Debriefing Report, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1970), 3, CARL.

⁷³ Ewell, "Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam," 13 (quote); Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 54-55; Clark, *Advice and Support*, 408-410; Ewell and Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, 204-206.

⁷⁴ Preer, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report," 1.

(Airmobile). After units collocated and began to work together, III ARVN Corps' performance and confidence improved dramatically.⁷⁵

Dong Tien assisted III ARVN Corps in familiarizing themselves with American planning and operational procedures. While the CATs taught doctrine, the American combat forces practiced it. ARVN leaders learned how to apply the doctrine by observing, interacting, and executing combined missions with U.S. forces. American division and brigade staffs mentored the Vietnamese by including them "in all phases of planning and execution."⁷⁶ The Vietnamese had access to combat assets they previously lacked (lift helicopters, artillery support, communication, and intelligence) and learned how to employ them. Progress was slow. American commanders learned patience during combined operations; it was easier for an American unit to assume control and execute the mission, but this "defeats the purpose of the program."⁷⁷ When *Dong Tien* began, the ARVN were passive participants. Eventually, individual units began to "graduate" and assume "an independent mission."⁷⁸

Once an ARVN unit's performance was adequate, it assumed operational control of the area from an American unit. The Capital Military District was the first area in Military Region 3 where the Vietnamese assumed independent security responsibilities. MACV remained worried about ARVN dependence on U.S. logistical and combat support functions. It was unclear if the Vietnamese could conduct logistics and the other war fighting functions without American support. In spite of these concerns, II Field Force deemed *Dong Tien* a success because it

⁷⁵ Clark, *Advice and Support*, 184-187, 409-417; Ewell, "Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam," 12; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 51, 55; Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 180; Preer, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report," 1, 33; Ewell and Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, 197-199; Davison, "Senior Debriefing Report," 26; McAuliffe, "Debriefing Report," 7-8; 1st Cavalry Division, *1st Air Cavalry Division: Memoirs of the First Team, Vietnam, August 1965 – December 1969* (Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing Company, 1995), 251-252.

⁷⁶ Preer, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report," 17.

⁷⁷ Preer, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report," 17.

⁷⁸ Ewell and Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, 204.

provided “the training ground for development of the combat skills of ARVN forces,” allowing III ARVN Corps to conduct independent combat operations.⁷⁹ Officially lasting only a few months, II Field Force continued combined combat training missions until 1971.⁸⁰

III ARVN Corps’ performance in late 1970 and 1971 was positive. Its participation in the 1970 Cambodian incursion was a morale boost. Finally, ARVN fought the Communists outside of South Vietnam. Vietnamese and American staffs jointly developed the Cambodian plan, but III ARVN Corps planned and executed its portion with minimal outside assistance.⁸¹ For his corps’ performance in Cambodia, *Time Magazine* labeled LTG Tri the “Patton of Parrott’s Beak.”⁸² III ARVN Corps was confident in its ability to defend the country as it began to conduct numerous independent cross border raids in 1970.

Did the ARVN Advisor Mission accomplish its essential task?

A drawback of ARVN success in Cambodia was a reduction in CAT advisors assigned to III ARVN Corps. With few exceptions, the Vietnamese battalions lost their advisors, with Davison suggesting in 1971 the elimination of regimental CATs. While the advisor mission disappeared, American liaison teams replaced them to maintain ARVN’s ability to request American combat support. The new liaison teams were not advisors; they could not replace the CAT’s ability to coach, teach, and mentor ARVN leaders. The CAT reduction continued, even after Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC) replaced II Field Force on 30 April 1971.⁸³

⁷⁹ Davison, “Debriefing Report,” 4.

⁸⁰ Preer, “Senior Officer Debriefing Report,” 16-18; Clark, *Advice and Support*, 417; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 55-56.

⁸¹ Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), 170; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 87; McAuliffe, “Debriefing Report,” 3-4; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 418-425, 478.

⁸² Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 338-339.

⁸³ Davison, “Senior Debriefing Report,” 26; McAuliffe, “Debriefing Report,” 13-14; Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 170; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 449-455.

While not as glamorous as combat operations, training a host nation's military and territorial forces is important in stability operations. Once it can "transition civil security responsibilities" to the host nation, American military forces can redeploy home.⁸⁴ Success criteria for an advisor should not only be the host nation military's success in tactical battles, but its ability to function at the operational level without external U.S. support.⁸⁵ The advisor mission and *Dong Tien* were quick fixes; they did not last long enough to train III ARVN Corps properly to function completely on its own. Training small infantry units was easy, but training the entire corps to operate using American standards takes longer. II Field Force ran out of time to complete the training.

II Field Force trained III ARVN Corps and the territorial forces to defend against the external PAVN threat while also fighting an internal guerrilla war against the Viet Cong. Both Krepinevich and Nagl criticize the training and equipping of ARVN as a conventional army. They contend this was the wrong choice because the Viet Cong, not PAVN, were the primary threat to South Vietnam.⁸⁶ They both overlook the 1972 and 1975 PAVN Offensives. III ARVN Corps survived the 1972 Easter Offensive because American advisors, air and fire support were present. However, they crumbled in 1975 when these assets were no longer available; the Vietnamese still needed American support to survive. The advisor mission ended in Military Region 3 before III ARVN Corps was capable of defeating PAVN without American assistance. Despite perceived success in the advisor and *Dong Tien* programs, II Field Force failed its mission to train III ARVN Corps to defeat the external threats to Military Region 3.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 3-13.

⁸⁵ Department of the Army, FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2006), 6-6.

⁸⁶ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 21-24; Nagl, *Learning to eat Soup with a Knife*, 120-124.

⁸⁷ Nguyen Due Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1983), 71-79; James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press: 2005), 154-172.

Combat Operations, the classic military mission

Military forces are most comfortable conducting combat operations. Consisting of two types—offensive and defensive operations—combat operations focus on destroying an enemy force and seizing, retaining, and securing terrain, resources, or population centers. This line of effort compliments civil security missions by defeating external military threats while assisting domestic security forces to combat insurgents, criminals, and other hostile groups that threaten internal stability.⁸⁸ Combat operations can break out in any type of conflict.

Combat operations were integral in II Field Force's campaign plan for Military Region 3. This line of effort established a secure environment for stability operations to occur unimpeded from Communist military activity. The scope, size, and type of combat operations varied as the Communists adjusted *dau tranh*'s stages. In 1969, the Communists abandoned the Counter-offensive Stage and returned to the Stages of Equilibrium and Contention. Recognizing "the Americans are seeking a way out," COSVN Resolution 9 directed its subordinate units to use guerrilla warfare inside South Vietnam while simultaneously using conventional warfare in the border provinces.⁸⁹ This mix of irregular and conventional warfare was to force MACV and ARVN to fight in multiple directions. The Communist regression to *dau tranh*'s Stage of Contention was an operational pause to buy time to reconsolidate its forces. It needed time to recruit, train, and deploy replacements from North Vietnam while restocking its supply caches. Time was on their side. At the opportune time, they would reassume the offensive.⁹⁰

The B2 Front, COSVN's designation for MR3, was a complex mix of conventional and guerrilla divisions (1st PAVN, 5th VC, 7th PAVN, and 9th VC) and regiments. The 1st PAVN

⁸⁸ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 3-7 – 3-13; Department of the Army, FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*, 5-11.

⁸⁹ Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), "Resolution 9," *Resolution Issued by the 9th Conference of COSVN*, July 1969, 17, 29. United States Department of State Collection, Texas Tech, <http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu> (accessed November 11, 2008).

⁹⁰ Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*, 142-148.

Division relocated to Military Region 4 by January 1970. (See Appendix 2) Many of the Viet Cong designated divisions and guerrilla forces used ethnic North Vietnamese PAVN soldiers as replacements for South Vietnamese Communist members lost in 1968. The conventionally equipped and trained PAVN and VC divisions remained in the border provinces so they could retreat to their sanctuaries when needed. Meanwhile, Viet Cong guerrillas and separate PAVN regiments operated in the interior, using a mix of small-unit infantry and guerrilla tactics to wear combat power away from the border. A mix of insurgent and conventional war existed in MR3.⁹¹

The Operational Defense: Denying the Communist access to MR3

II Field Force used combat operations to create Secure Areas. Operationally, the Area Security System was an area defense as II Field Force arrayed itself “in a relatively static, counterinsurgency posture” by assigning each division an AO.⁹² The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the 25th Infantry Division, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and their partnered ARVN units (25th ARVN Division and the ARVN Airborne Division) performed a corps guard in the Border Surveillance Zone along the Cambodian border to interdict cross-border movement. Simultaneously, the 1st Infantry Division, the 199th Infantry Brigade, the 82nd Airborne’s 3rd Brigade, Australians, Thais, and ARVN units operated in the interior provinces. (See Appendix 3)

“The Leavenworth type of defense” had limited utility in Military Region 3.⁹³ II Field Force used “small unit infantry operations” of company size or smaller to apply constant pressure on the enemy “system” of PAVN combat units, VC guerrilla force, caches, transportation

⁹¹The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 244-249; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 31 January 1970*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1970), 16; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 547; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 242-243; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 600; Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), *Analysis of Vietnamization: A Description of the War, 1967-1971* (24 February 1971), IV-48 – IV-49.

⁹² Davison, “Senior Debriefing Report,” 5.

⁹³ Julian J. Ewell, “Impressions of a Division Commander in Vietnam,” *Senior Officer Debriefing Report*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1969), 4-6.

networks, safe havens, and base areas.⁹⁴ Operating from firebases, small units conducted patrols and ambushes to whittle away Communist combat power and logistics capabilities.⁹⁵

II Field Force conducted three types of combat missions: search and destroy, clear and hold, and securing missions.⁹⁶ A common misperception is that search and destroy operations ended after 1968. This is not true. Relabeled as “reconnaissance in force” or “spoiling attacks,” II Field Force used search and destroy missions to locate, interdict, and clear enemy forces, caches, and infiltration lanes.⁹⁷ Clear and hold missions seized terrain while securing missions defended key terrain and infrastructure. Using a concept called “jitterbugging,” the corps used its interior lines of operation to attack Communist base areas and to reinforce units that were in contact or had found a cache.⁹⁸ Consequently, the Communists had difficulty moving openly in MR3.

⁹⁴ Ewell, “Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam,” 6.

⁹⁵ Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 31 January 1970*, 23; Shelby L. Stanton, *Anatomy of a Division: The 1st Cav in Vietnam*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1987), 158.

⁹⁶ A Search and Destroy mission was “the infantry’s traditional attack mission: locate the enemy...bring him to battle, and either destroy him or force his surrender.” A combat unit attacked a suspected insurgent base area or conducted a movement to contact to find and destroy PAVN units. Lasting from days to weeks, their purpose was to destroy the enemy, not to occupy ground or maintain a permanent presence. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 83. Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Counterinsurgency Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2006), 368.

During a Clear and Hold mission, combat units removed all Communist military presence from an area, establishing the necessary security requirements for Vietnamese and American Civil Affairs units to occupy the area. A military force provided security until the police and territorial forces assumed control. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Counterinsurgency Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 368-369.

Securing Missions were the “Hold” aspect of Clear and Hold. ARVN, local police and territorial forces did these missions. Combat units lived in small outposts near population centers to target the last vestiges of the insurgent political and military infrastructure. Securing operations allowed economic, social, and political measures to take root with little threat of Communist military interference. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Counterinsurgency Doctrine, 1942-1976*, 369.

⁹⁷ Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 134.

⁹⁸ Jitterbugging: “Military slang for repetitive airmobile insertions in an area suspected of enemy presence.” A platoon inserts first. Upon enemy contact, additional troops air assault in to seal off and defeat the enemy. If no contact occurred after 30 minutes, the unit tries another area. A battalion planned to make 12-18 insertions to develop contact. Harris W. Hollis, “Senior Officer Debriefing Report: MG Harris W. Hollis, CG, 25th Infantry Division, Period 15 September 1969 to 2 April 1970, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1969), 4, CARL.

These tactical missions denied the Communists the ability to establish the “logistics nose” of prepositioned supplies and troops needed to sustain an offensive.⁹⁹ PAVN did not have interior lines; they had to rely on exterior lines of communication emanating from Cambodia to infiltrate men and equipment to safe havens inside MR3. These lines were vulnerable to detection and interdiction. Upon discovering an infiltration lane like the Jolley Trail in the 1st Cavalry sector, II Field Force would sit astride them, using firepower and maneuver to interdict any movement along the trail. Eventually, the logistics system broke down; the trickle of supplies from Cambodia hampered Communist operations. PAVN had to shorten their exposed supply lines by operating closer to the border, abandoning the Viet Cong to survive off the population.¹⁰⁰

While the area defense shielded Military Region 3 from a PAVN conventional attack and interrupted insurgent external logistical support, guerrilla warfare still existed. II Field Force did not have a secure, rear area. Small direct fire attacks, sapper raids, and indirect fire attacks required the corps to use combat power to defend key infrastructure like firebases, government buildings, and urban centers. Operating from firebases and base camps, units used local patrols to find and disrupt Communist forces massing for an attack. When a sustained assault did occur, the unit in contact defended until reinforcements arrived. Again, the corps used its interior lines and air mobility capability to reinforce rapidly an area under Communist attack. The ability to defend at the small unit level allowed the corps to disperse and maintain constant pressure on the enemy.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Sorley, *A Better War*, 21.

¹⁰⁰ 1st Cavalry Division, *1st Air Cavalry Division*, 252; Ewell and Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, 198; Andrade, Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War,” 165, 170; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 134, 255; The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 244-252.

¹⁰¹ Ewell and Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, 196; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 257; Military History Branch, Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), *Command History: 1970* vol 1 (Saigon: MACV, 1971), III-155 – III-164; Tom Mangold and John Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, (New York, NY: Berkley Publishing Group, 1986), 263.

The Area Security System was working in MR3. II Field Force and III ARVN Corps were interdicting PAVN movement along the border while rooting out Viet Cong guerrillas in the interior provinces. In spite of their success, Communist presence in Cambodia was a constant reminder that security conditions were fragile; a PAVN conventional offensive could undo any gains made. The year 1970 was “a momentous one” for II Field Force when it received orders to destroy the Cambodian sanctuaries.¹⁰²

The Operational Offensive: Attacking the Cambodian sanctuaries

A source of frustration for II Field Force was the enemy’s ability to escape into Cambodia when the pressure became unbearable. From these base areas, Communist troops rested and refitted before returning to the combat zone. Previously, covert air strikes and ARVN incursions were the only means used to target these sanctuaries. This changed in March 1970 when the Cambodian Army conducted a bloodless coup, replacing Prince Sihanouk with Prime Minister Lon Nol as ruler. Cambodia’s tacit support of North Vietnam evaporated as the Cambodian Army, with ARVN assistance, unsuccessfully tried to purge the Communists from its border regions. The failure to dislodge the North Vietnamese forced Lon Nol to request American assistance to drive the North Vietnamese from Cambodia. Politically, the way was finally clear for a ground assault to clear the sanctuaries.¹⁰³

On 24 April, Abrams tasked II Field Force and the III ARVN Corps to conduct a combined operational offensive into Cambodia to destroy Communist bases in the “Fishhook,” “Parrot’s Beak,” and “Angel’s Wing” areas. The target date for execution was in one week, 30

¹⁰² D.P. McAuliffe, “Senior Officer Debriefing Report,” (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1971), 1.

¹⁰³ John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 31; Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 231; The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 255; Thomas A. Bruscino, Jr, *Out of Bounds: Transnational Sanctuary in Irregular Warfare* (Ft Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 30-31.

April. Timing was important; weather conditions would deteriorate in late May when the monsoons began. As the plan developed, the combined ARVN and American corps staffs divided the Cambodian AO into Vietnamese and American sectors. III ARVN Corps had the “Angel’s Wing” and “Parrot’s Beak” in the south while II Field Force had the northern “Fishhook.” Even though each element had a distinct boundary, the *Dong Tien* partnerships would continue. Davison, who replaced Ewell two weeks prior, emphasized the inclusion of ARVN units into American division plans, formalizing a quasi-command relationship between partnered American and ARVN units.¹⁰⁴ A concept emerged “to achieve maximum destruction of installations in base areas along the Cambodian border” while continuing “current operations in the interior of [MR3] to assure essential security and progress” of the corps campaign plan.¹⁰⁵ (See Appendix 4)

The Cambodian invasion was a stepping-stone towards attaining MACV’s intermediate objective, but not at the expense of current internal security gains. The 1st Infantry Division was in the process of withdrawing, creating a void in the area defense. Units involved in the offensive, (1st Cavalry Division [Airmobile], 25th Infantry Division, ARVN Airborne Division, 5th and 25th ARVN Divisions) had to fill this void simultaneous with operations in Cambodia. To mitigate the lack of combat power in the corps rear, territorial units assumed control of ARVN AOs while U.S. divisions left a brigade to defend the division rear.¹⁰⁶ The transition from defensive to offensive operations was not smooth as units had difficulty preparing to operate in an austere environment. These problems did not prevent the corps from being ready as scheduled.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Headquarters, II Field Force, *II FFORCV Commander’s Evaluation Report-Cambodia*, 31 July 1970, 3-6, CARL; Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 36, 70-73; Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1977), 169; J.D. Coleman, *Incursion* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 223; MACV, *Command History: 1970*, vol 3, C-33.

¹⁰⁵ Headquarters, II Field Force, “Letter of Instruction (Operations in Cambodia),” II Field Force, APO San Francisco, 96266, 1, CARL.

¹⁰⁶ Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 47-48; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 30 April 1970*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Davison, “Debriefing Report,” 5-6.

Activity in Cambodia began on 30 April with III ARVN Corps moving into the “Parrot’s Beak” and “Angel’s Wing;” the next day II Field Force assaulted into the “Fishhook.”¹⁰⁸ A few days later, II ARVN Corps, I Field Force, and IV ARVN Corps launched supporting attacks from Military Regions 2 and 4. Over the next two months, a series of operations penetrated several Communist sanctuaries. Resistance was light because only PAVN logistics troops defended the sanctuaries. The primary targets—COSVN headquarters and the PAVN and VC divisions—were gone because earlier in April they retreated deeper into Cambodia. Because of political considerations, an opportunity was lost to pursue PAVN as it retreated into lesser-developed base areas. II Field Force’s limit of advance into Cambodia was 30 kilometers; the ARVN’s limit ranged from 40 to 70 kilometers. While there was little contact with PAVN, II Field Force did disrupt the Communist logistics system. Using search and destroy techniques, the invaders located several underground supply depots, seizing over 12,000 weapons, 1,534 tons of munitions and 5,873 tons of rice in two months. The temporary destruction of the sanctuaries hampered PAVN’s future offensive plans for at least one year as they recouped material losses, rebuilt the sanctuaries, and reestablished lines of communication.¹⁰⁹

After II Field Force withdrew from Cambodia on 30 June 1970, American ground troops could no longer operate beyond South Vietnam’s borders. This did not mean the end of Vietnamese raids or the use of American artillery and air strikes to support ARVN incursions into Cambodia. These restrictions hinted that the final withdrawal of American forces from Military Region 3 was imminent. Consequently, Davison and Tri issued guidance for American forces to

¹⁰⁸ Washington delayed MACV’s attack 24 hours. There is no official reason for the delay. Sorley claims it was to notify the British and French, but it may be so the attack coordinated with President Nixon’s television address on the night of 30 April, 1 May in Vietnam. The South Vietnamese supported the shift because astrologers said 28- 29 April was bad day to attack. Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 286-287.

¹⁰⁹ Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 53, 146-147, 171; Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 36-39, 43; Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*, (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 177; Headquarters, II Field Force, *II FFORCV Commander’s Evaluation Report-Cambodia*, 31 July 1970, 7, Appendix B, 2-3, CARL.

begin transitioning their areas of operation with their ARVN counterparts, preparing Military Region 3 for II Field Force's departure.¹¹⁰

After Cambodia: Transitioning Military Region 3 to III ARVN Corps

When II Field Force and III ARVN Corps returned to South Vietnam, they resumed the area defense. The new guidance, dubbed the "Wet Season" and "Dry Season" Strategies, sought to capitalize on the success of Cambodian operations by transitioning security missions from the Americans to the Vietnamese. Upon return to South Vietnam, II Field Force ceased its border interdiction missions and repositioned forces to the interior provinces; III ARVN Corps assumed the border interdiction missions. From new AOs along the international border, III ARVN Corps executed cross-border raids to neutralize PAVN forces regrouping in their sanctuaries while maintaining pressure on the traditional infiltration routes into the region.¹¹¹ (See Appendix 5) The transition appeared smooth because there was no increase in PAVN conventional operations until 1972, a year after II Field Force withdrew from the region.

The area defense and Cambodian incursion significantly reduced Communist activity inside MR3 by cutting supply lines to the Viet Cong. NLF political cadres and Viet Cong soldiers had to survive without outside support, reducing their overall effectiveness. The number of Viet Cong attacks dropped as they husbanded their scant resources. II Field Force neutralized PAVN and isolated the surviving Viet Cong from their external support. Combat operations created a shield for pacification to take hold in Military Region 3.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Davison, "Debriefing Report," 12; Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 124; Cosmas, *MACV: Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 309-310.

¹¹¹ McAuliffe, "Debriefing Report," 6; Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 124; Davison, "Debriefing Report," 12-13; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 89.

¹¹² Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 31 October 1970*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1970), 22; Davison, "Senior Debriefing Report," 12; Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 124; McAuliffe, "Debriefing Report," 3, 6-7; Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 180-181.

Pacification: Defeating remnants of the Viet Cong

II Field Force used combat operations to create an area defense to neutralize PAVN conventional forces and interdict their external lines of communication to Viet Cong guerrillas, providing a cocoon for pacification or stability operations to proceed safely.¹¹³ The South Vietnamese's Pacification and Development Program had three goals: "sustained territorial and internal security" from Viet Cong guerrilla and terrorist attacks, "establish an effective political structure," and "stimulate self-sustaining economic activity."¹¹⁴

Pacification, called "revolutionary development" by the South Vietnamese, sought "to establish cooperation among the people, between the people and the government, and among the various government agencies."¹¹⁵ II Field Force's Deputy Commander for CORDS coordinated the corps' pacification support with South Vietnam's Central Pacification and Development Council (CPDC). The Pacification and Development Plan for Military Region 3 had eight objectives: 1) territorial security, 2) protection of the people from terrorism, 3) create peoples' self defense forces, 4) reform local administration, 5) generate greater national unity, 6) provide a better life for war victims, 7) people's information, and 8) provide prosperity for all. These

¹¹³ Pacification was a theoretical construct used in Counterinsurgency. MACV defined pacification in its 1968 *Handbook for Military Support to Pacification* as "the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's underground government, the assertion or reassertion of political control and involvement of the people in government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion." This definition appears verbatim in BG Tran Dinh Tho's 1977 Monograph *Pacification*. Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), *Handbook for Military Support to Pacification* (Saigon, SVN: MACV, 1968), 1; Tho, *Pacification*, v.

Pacification is not part of the current Army lexicon; the closest definition is stability operations.

Stability Operations: An overarching term encompassing various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief. Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), Glossary-13.

¹¹⁴ MACV, *Handbook for Military Support to Pacification*, 6.

¹¹⁵ Office of the Deputy for CORDS, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, "1970 Pacification and Development Program," (Saigon, SVN: MACV, 1970), 1, CARL.

objectives conformed to three general goals: security (Objectives 1, 2 and 3), governance (Objectives 4 and 5), and economic development (Objectives 6, 7, and 8).¹¹⁶

Security: Using military and territorial forces to eliminate the Viet Cong

While major combat operations focused on defeating PAVN, pacification's security element used both combat operations and internal security missions to destroy the insurgency. This was the counterinsurgency portion of the One War Strategy. U.S. units can provide internal security, but it was imperative for the host nation to use its police, paramilitary, and military forces against insurgent, terrorist, or criminal organizations that are sources of internal instability. The host nation uses both law enforcement and small unit combat actions to establish civil security. Security is essential; it allows the government to gain civil control of the populace.¹¹⁷

Combat operations complimented pacification because it established a secure environment for the government to expand its control. Security missions had success, especially after the Viet Cong decimated itself during the 1968 Tet Offensive. The southern insurgency never recovered from its losses of ethnic South Vietnamese soldiers and political cadres. These losses provided an opportunity for South Vietnam to occupy rural areas that were former Viet Cong strongholds. With the Area Security System as a guideline, II Field Force used clear and hold missions to establish a permanent presence in Communist base areas. Conducted in three phases, these missions used the clear, hold, and build methodology described in the 2006 publication of FM 3-24. In the clear phase, ARVN and American forces conducted a tactical offense to eradicate PAVN and guerrilla main force units. Upon clearing the sector, the hold

¹¹⁶ Office of the Deputy for CORDS, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, "1970 Pacification and Development Program," 1; Military History Branch, Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), *Command History: 1969* vol 2 (Saigon, SVN: MACV, 1969), VIII-8 – VIII-13.

¹¹⁷ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 3-13; Idem, FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*, 5-12.

phase began as the Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PFs) assumed responsibility for securing the liberated area, freeing combat forces to begin clear and hold missions against other bases areas. The RF/PFs would remain in the area; their mission was to protect the emerging government infrastructure from renewed Viet Cong terrorism. Eventually the build phase would begin as the government enacted its developmental and reform programs to establish its legitimacy.¹¹⁸

The South Vietnamese units best suited for internal security were territorial forces (Regional Forces, Popular Forces, and People's Self Defense Forces [PSDF]).¹¹⁹ Unlike III ARVN Corps, these elements lived and worked in their home villages; they had a stake in protecting the community. Organized as the National Guard, territorial forces worked for the Provincial and District Chiefs, but augmented ARVN on combat operations. They were the primary counterinsurgent force once ARVN assumed responsibility for MR3 in late 1970.¹²⁰

II Field Force's advisor mission included territorial forces. The corps Deputy Commander for CORDS, provincial and district advisors, and the Mobile Advisory Teams (MATs) were responsible for training, mentoring, and equipping the territorial forces. The MATs trained the territorial forces for combat, but the CORDS provincial and district advisors had dual mentorship responsibilities to both the territorial forces and local civilian governments for security issues. To assist CORDS in its advisor mission, II Field Force expanded *Dong Tien* to include territorial forces. Much like its success in training ARVN, the *Dong Tien* program improved the territorial forces' performance against the local Viet Cong remnants. Their training,

¹¹⁸ James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 83; Tran Van Tra, *History of the Bulwark B2 Front, Volume 5: Concluding the 30-Years War, Southeast Asia Report No. 1247*, (Washington, D.C.: Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 1983), 35; Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC and NVA*, 200; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 237-238; Tho, *Pacification*, 89-90; Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 267-268.

¹¹⁹ People's Self Defense Corps (PSDF): A paramilitary village defense organization established to provide local security. Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 290-291; Tho, *Pacification*, 150-155.

¹²⁰ Ngo Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1981), 34-43; Tho, *Pacification*, 40-49; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 23, 56-58; Hunt, *Pacification*, 182.

combined with their knowledge of the local area, enabled the territorial forces to participate actively in non-combat security missions like the Phoenix Program.¹²¹

The Phoenix Program coordinated military and law enforcement agencies in eliminating the local insurgent networks.¹²² Its purpose was to kill, capture, or turn surviving Communist insurgents. Relying on intelligence from the population and Hoi Chanh—Communists who defected under the Chieu Hoi “Open Arms” reconciliation program—the police and territorial forces executed raids to neutralize local shadow governments. The program was a South Vietnamese initiative; CORDS advisors provided overwatch to the Phoenix Committees at corps, provincial, and district levels by helping to synchronize intelligence with internal security missions and II Field Force combat operations. Phoenix succeeded in destroying the surviving Viet Cong Infrastructure in MR3; the South Vietnamese could now exercise the civil control needed to enact their reforms and development programs safely.¹²³

Governance: Developing provincial and district government administration

As part of pacification, CORDS assisted the government in developing its administrative functions in Military Region 3. Pacification successfully improved South Vietnam’s internal security infrastructure, but its civil administration and legal systems needed more work. It was the

¹²¹ Tho, *Pacification*, 86-88; MACV, *Handbook for Military Support to Pacification*, 30-31; Vien, *The US Advisor*, 128-137; Edward Bautze, Jr., “Senior Officer Debriefing Report: MG Edward Bautz, Jr., Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations, MACV & CG, 25th Infantry Division, Period March 1969 to December 1970,” (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1971), 8-10-13, CARL; Ewell and Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, 204; Davison, “Senior Debriefing Report,” 17-18; A. E. Miloy, “Senior Officer Debriefing Report-MG A. E. Miloy,” *Senior Officer Debriefing Reports*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1971), 5-7, CARL.

¹²² Insurgent Network: The total resources used to conduct an insurgency. This network contains a political command and control system, an intelligence system, armed forces, and a support system. U.S. Army Combat Developments Command, “Chapter 1 Exploitation of the Insurgent Base Area System,” 1.

¹²³ Tho, *Pacification*, 66-74; Office of the Deputy for CORDS, Headquarters, II Field Force, “1970 Pacification and Development Program,” 2; Ewell, “Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam,” 7-8; Hunt, *Pacification*, 242-251; MACV, *Command History: 1969* vol 2, VIII-63 – VIII-75; Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War*, (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 1990), 131; Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*, 201; Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 271-278; Sorley, *A Better War*, 66-69.

II Field Force CORDS staff's responsibility to work with the South Vietnamese government to improve its effectiveness.¹²⁴

The South Vietnamese had to counter political *dau tranh* and the shadow Communist government, the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). Operating from Cambodia's "Fishhook," the PRG emerged in 1968 after the NLF merged with other anti-government political parties. The primary function of the PRG was to maintain the ideological link between Hanoi and Viet Cong governments inside South Vietnam.¹²⁵ To defeat the PRG's political *dau tranh* efforts, CORDS used the Phoenix Program to arrest local Communist political cadres while advising the South Vietnamese to reform the government. One reform was national elections to select district and hamlet officials, replacing the process of central appointments. These newly elected officials would implement infrastructure improvements, economic reforms, and address social grievances in Military Region 3.¹²⁶

American military officers were the primary "administrative and political counselors" to the Provincial and District Chiefs, advising them on security, political, economic, and development issues.¹²⁷ Assisting these officers in their mentorship tasks were American civilians assigned to CORDS and the Vietnamese Revolutionary Development cadres. The Revolutionary Development cadres were South Vietnamese civilians with technical expertise in government administration, self-defense, and economics.¹²⁸ When the Vietnamese encountered an obstacle they could not solve, CORDS advisors helped "blast the problem up through district, province

¹²⁴ Department of the FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 3-14.

¹²⁵ Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*, 132-133, 145-155.

¹²⁶ Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*, (New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc, 1970), 211; MACV, *Handbook Military Support of Pacification*, 17; Tho, *Pacification*, 144-150; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 30 April 1970*, 49; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 31 July 1969*, 53.

¹²⁷ Tho, *Pacification*, 87.

¹²⁸ MACV, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, 17; Tho, *Pacification*, 51-54, 86-88.

and [military region] into various ministries” until it resolved itself.”¹²⁹ From the hamlet to the provincial level, II Field Force worked with the local South Vietnamese to build an effective, local government that provided the groundwork for economic development.

Economic Development: Addressing root causes for Viet Cong support

The province, district, and hamlet governments were instrumental in developing the local economic infrastructure. CORDS used the Revolutionary Development cadres, American combat divisions and other American agencies like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to provide quick, high profile projects that assisted local governments in improving their economic infrastructures. One such project was road construction. Corps engineers built and repaired roads throughout the region while American and Vietnamese combat units secured the roads to ensure access to population centers. New roads encouraged inter-village trade, but also provided military routes to transport troops and supplies to units dispersed across the region.¹³⁰

As infrastructure and security conditions improved, refugees returned to their homes, overtaking existing economic assistance programs. Instead of rebuilding destroyed homes and village institutions, the corps’ CORDS advisors encouraged local governments to institute self-help programs like irrigation development, market construction, medical care, and other needed essential services. The growing village populations could now rebuild their economies on their own. The self-help programs allowed the population to rebuild their economies while attempting to correct social grievances that contributed initially to Viet Cong popular support.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Ewell, “Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam,” 4.

¹³⁰ Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 269; Ewell, “Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam,” 10.

¹³¹ Tho, *Pacification* 105-129; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 57; Ewell and Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, 217-218; Office of the Deputy for CORDS, Headquarters, II Field Force “1970 Pacification and Development Program,” 2; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 30 April 1970*, 69.

A source of discontent in the rural population since 1954 was land ownership. The government addressed this social grievance in 1970 with the passage of the Land-to-the-Tiller bill. This bill allowed farmers to own the property they lived on without having to compensate current landowners. Over the next year, approximately 70,000 farmers in MR3 gained ownership of over 130,000 hectares of rice land. This was a massive social redistribution program, but it still did not legitimize the government. It was about 10 years too late; it only legalized previous Communist land redistributions.¹³² Social reforms alone could not provide the government the legitimacy it needed from its citizens.

II Field Force tried to help the provincial and district governments to address other social and economic needs. However, the corps was unable to fix the corruption, nepotism, and incompetence that permeated from the national to hamlet levels. Consequently, the population remained distrustful of the South Vietnamese government's efforts to implement social and economic reforms.¹³³

Did pacification work?

In his Senior Officer Debriefing Report, LTG Ewell noted there was “an inevitable tendency for people to rationalize civic action, building paved highways and similar good works as being more constructive than eliminating the Communists.”¹³⁴ This statement typifies post war critiques that these programs alone could win the war. While pacification did begin to rebuild local economies and enact some social reforms, it was creating a secure environment that enabled

¹³² Tho, *Pacification*, 140-144; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 30 April 1970*, 48; Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 272-273; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 269; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 31 April 1971*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, 1971), 43-45; Davison, “Senior Debriefing Report,” 27-30.

¹³³ Birtle, “PROVN, Westmoreland and the Historians: A Reappraisal,” 1243, Ronald Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, (New York: Vintage Books, 199), 293.

¹³⁴ Ewell, “Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam,” 4.

the Vietnamese to establish civil control over the population. Without security, the government would not be able to expend time and resources on civil programs.¹³⁵

Pacification succeeded in its internal security missions. The Phoenix Program exacerbated Viet Cong losses from Tet by further destroying the Communist political infrastructure. The insurgency never regained the strength and influence it had prior to Tet, even after the influx of ethnic North Vietnamese into its political and military ranks. The RF/PFs and PSDF secured their communities from VC terrorist attacks while the national police conducted law enforcement operations to arrest and prosecute known insurgents. Throughout the process, CORDS advisors provided mentorship to the government as it enacted pacification's security, government building, and economic development programs.¹³⁶ Success in pacification was visible by 1969 as visitors like Sir Robert Thompson—a noted counterinsurgency expert—could finally “visit areas and walk through villages which had been under Viet Cong control for years.”¹³⁷

While pacification neutralized the Viet Cong, it was unable to fix South Vietnamese society. Rampant corruption and incompetence permeated throughout the country. Self-help programs were a government effort to overcome these inadequacies and earn loyalty from the populace.¹³⁸ While the South Vietnamese no longer supported the Communists, they continued to distrust the South Vietnamese government. A South Vietnamese national identity did not emerge as the populace waited to see who would win the conflict. Pacification succeeded in destroying

¹³⁵ Birtle, “PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal,” 1227; Ewell, “Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam,” 5.

¹³⁶ Nguyen Dinh Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1983), 79-88; Spector, *After Tet*, 289; The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 237-238.

¹³⁷ Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*, 209.

¹³⁸ Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 275-276

the Viet Cong in Military Region 3, but could not connect the populace with the government. South Vietnam would remain a nation in name only.

Vietnamization: Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory

Vietnamization was America's national policy "for the complete withdrawal of all US combat ground forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable."¹³⁹ For Vietnamization to succeed, South Vietnam needed the capability to defend against a North Vietnamese invasion while containing internal Communist subversion. Vietnamization was not a MACV strategic thrust, but policy that guided its three strategic thrusts. When Abrams assigned II Field Force the Vietnamization mission for MR3, it was to ensure the corps complied with the policy. Subsequently, the corps made Vietnamization a fourth "submission."¹⁴⁰ The Vietnamization line of effort was an information campaign that clarified the objectives for American operations in Military Region 3 to III ARVN Corps, the Vietnamese people, and the corps itself. Instead of being a separate strand in the campaign plan, Vietnamization interwove the advisor mission, combat operations, and pacification strands together to create a single rope. II Field Force's campaign plan was Vietnamization.¹⁴¹

II Field Force's plan to implement Vietnamization in Military Region 3

Vietnamization had two fundamental parts: train and equip ARVN and withdraw American troops from Vietnam. Using the timeline from the Combined Strategic Objectives Campaign Plan, II Field Force had to complete training and equipping III ARVN Corps by June

¹³⁹ President Richard Nixon's Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam, 3 November 1969, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2303> (accessed February 1, 2009).

¹⁴⁰ Ewell, "Impressions of a Field Force Commander in Vietnam," 1.

¹⁴¹ Department of the Army, FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*, 5-6.

1972. The assumption was funding would terminate prior to the 1972 Presidential election.

MACV did not anticipate additional resources to continue training ARVN after 1972.¹⁴²

The combat operations, advisor, and pacification lines of effort were integral in Vietnamization. The area defense and Cambodian offensive bought time for Vietnamization to occur. The corps' advisor mission taught the Vietnamese units American doctrine while *Dong Tien* gave III ARVN Corps and MR3 territorial forces valuable combat experience; training them in the skills needed to militarily defeat the Communists while establishing civil control over the populace. The nation-building aspects of pacification—governance and economic development—sought to create a unified national government that could survive on its own. Failure in one line of effort meant Vietnamization would probably fail; the blood, sweat, and tears II Field Force shed in Military Region 3 would be for naught.

Vietnamization provided South Vietnam's military with new equipment. From 1969 until 1971, II Field Force's military advisors executed the Consolidated RVNAF Improvement and Mobilization Plan (CRIMP). Under CRIMP, Vietnamese military forces received modern small arms, tanks, artillery, and logistics equipment. By 1970, III ARVN Corps' had the same equipment as II Field Force. CRIMP also modernized the Regional and Popular Forces and outfitted the PSDF. The territorial forces finally had the arms and equipment needed to conduct pacification's internal security missions, freeing III ARVN Corps to focus on defeating PAVN.¹⁴³

As III ARVN Corps modernized, it conducted independent combat operations. III ARVN Corps had no choice, if they did not assume operational and tactical responsibility for combat and pacification operations, who would? As American units departed, they conducted a relief in place with the same ARVN unit they trained during *Dong Tien*. While the transitions appeared to go

¹⁴²Cosmas, *MACV: Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 143; MACV, "Commander's Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan," 29.

¹⁴³Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 29-31, Cosmas, *MACV: Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 159; Sorley, *A Better War*, 214-216; Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, 47-53.

smoothly, redeployment planning did not. II Field Force and MACV had little input in the withdrawal timeline and planning. Policy makers in Washington dictated the timeline; subsequently, the withdrawal assumed a life of its own.

The withdrawal of combat forces from South Vietnam would occur based on three criteria: level of enemy activity, progress of peace negotiations, and the speed of modernizing ARVN. Despite the rhetoric, Vietnamization did not use these criteria for withdrawal planning; American domestic politics did. Beginning in August 1969, II Field Force began a two-year redeployment schedule when the 9th Infantry Division departed Military Region 4. Initially, II Field Force and MACV provided input, but the schedule accelerated. Eventually, July 1971 became the new completion date for the intermediate objective. Until its departure in May 1971, II Field Force planned for a continual reduction of combat strength because the withdrawals would continue as scheduled regardless of planned combat operations or renewed Communist activity.¹⁴⁴

The quick withdrawal and its psychological effect on corps operations

Vietnamization was not just a withdrawal; there was an information operation associated with it. Inside Military Region 3, Vietnamization's purpose was to legitimize the South Vietnamese government. As II Field Force departed, the III ARVN Corps and local government administrations assumed responsibility for pacification and combat operations. CORDS and ARVN advisor missions continued, but even these assets were withdrawing. After 1970, the South Vietnamese became the primary planners and executioners of the One War Strategy. Vietnamization's information campaign had mixed results among the Vietnamese people. They

¹⁴⁴ Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, 23-24; Cosmas, *MACV: Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 145-155, 159-179.

were ambivalent to Communists, but also distrustful of government reforms. By 1971, Military Region 3's populace adopted neutral positions as they waited to see who would win.¹⁴⁵

II Field Force also had problems promoting Vietnamization as a war winning policy to its own Soldiers; the policy negatively affected the corps. Social problems abounded throughout the corps as narcotics use, racial tensions, and criminal activity increased. A strong source for these problems was the feeling of abandonment that junior officers and young Soldiers felt because they believed their "senior officers and NCOs lacked interest in them and their problems."¹⁴⁶ MACV's policy to break units up as they departed Vietnam further exasperated the corps' social issues. The policy was that Soldiers at the end of their tours went home with withdrawing units while personnel just beginning their tours transferred to formations remaining behind in Vietnam. Unit morale and integrity disintegrated as Soldiers left in Vietnam did not want to become a casualty in a war that was ending. While the social problems were expansive, they did not hinder the corps' combat performance. Combat troops performed their duties while the corps' leadership developed programs to address these issues.¹⁴⁷

II Field Force achieved MACV's Immediate Objective to secure Military Region 3 by 1970; however, it could not achieve the intermediate objective. It left Vietnam in 1971, a year earlier than expected. Vietnamization happened too fast. Perceived Vietnamese successes on both the battlefield and in government reforms were short term; two years was not enough time to correct the corruption, instability, and nepotism that existed in all levels of the government and military.¹⁴⁸ As a concept, Vietnamization had the potential to work, but political time constraints

¹⁴⁵ Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," 1241.

¹⁴⁶ Davison, "Debriefing Report," 32.

¹⁴⁷ Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 30 April 1970*, 4; Davison, "Debriefing Report," 31-35; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 232-239; Sorley, *A Better War*, 287-304.

¹⁴⁸ Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," 1243.

denied it a chance to succeed. South Vietnam's disintegration in 1975 is proof Vietnamization happened too quickly.

Conclusion: Doing it all, lessons from II Field Force

A complex operational environment existed in Military Region 3. Four Communist conventional divisions and a struggling insurgency operated in the region. Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese were attempting to forge a functioning nation by reforming its military, government, economy, and society. II Field Force's campaign was like eating a seven-course dinner. It needed a fork, spoon, and knife to eat the entire meal. If one utensil were missing, portions would remain on the plate because the diner was unable to use the other utensils to create manageable portions he could consume. II Field Force had to develop and execute a campaign plan that used all of its utensils to assist the South Vietnamese in meeting the myriad of challenges that existed in MR3.

Did II Field Force conduct full spectrum operations in Military Region 3?

From 1969 until 1971, neither a general war nor an insurgency solely existed inside Military Region 3. Sometimes the conflict resembled a general war while at other times it had the characteristics of an insurgency. Military Region 3's operational environment encompassed both general war and insurgency. The campaign plan had to address both conflict types; else, the corps would be unable to rein the situation to within tolerable levels where South Vietnam could safely govern Military Region 3.

The debate between the Clausewitzians and Hearts-and-Minders revolves around the type of operations needed to defeat the Communists. Clausewitzians argued for conventional major combat operations against the North Vietnamese while Hearts-and-Minders preferred counterinsurgency operations against the Viet Cong. Current doctrine's categorization of major operations into operational themes compounds this debate. Categorization implies only one type of operation (major combat operations or counterinsurgency) is the harbinger of success, even if the enemy is conducting multiple operations that span the entire spectrum of conflict. No single category can describe Military Region 3 from 1969 to 1971 because the Communists transitioned back and forth across *dau tranh*'s stages. In 1969, the Communists published Resolution 9,

regressing from a conventional war to a guerrilla war in order to reconstitute their forces. While their next conventional offensive occurred in 1972 a year after II Field Force withdrew, it spent 1971 preparing for it. II Field Force recognized the dual nature of the conflict; it did not categorize the environment into either an insurgency or conventional war, but merged them into a “one-war” concept.

II Field Force conducted full spectrum operations in Military Region 3. Using MACV’s One War Strategy as guidance, the corps’ campaign plan used offensive, defensive and stability operations to wage a counterinsurgency and major combat operations simultaneously. They were symbiotic; one could not succeed without the other succeeding. The campaign plan used four lines of effort (advisor mission, combat operations, pacification, and Vietnamization) as a road map to guide their operations. The lines of effort were an iterative product that evolved whenever something new affected the corps’ operational environment.

The corps’ combat operations line of effort applied continuous pressure on the Communist military system. Operating from static areas, the corps used an area defense to shield South Vietnam from a potential North Vietnamese invasion; subordinate units conducted tactical offensive missions to find and destroy Communist combat forces, locate supply caches, and interdict supply lines coming from Cambodia. While combat operations occurred throughout Military Region 3, the majority were against conventional PAVN units operating near the Cambodian border. The 1970 Cambodian Invasion was a limited operational offensive designed to destroy Communist sanctuaries and logistics hubs that supported both PAVN and Viet Cong organizations. Combat operations neutralized PAVN’s ability to operate and provide supplies to guerrillas inside Military Region 3, creating conditions for pacification to occur without the threat of PAVN interference.

The pacification line of effort was a stability operation. In 1968, stability operations equated to counterinsurgency. Primarily focused on destroying the Viet Cong Infrastructure, pacification used a combination of offensive, defensive, and stability tasks to provide internal

security and build government capacity. While not officially known as nation building, pacification assisted the young, fragile republic to build its security, economic and government infrastructure. The advisor line of effort supported both pacification and combat operations. Using both advisors and American combat units as training aids, II Field Force mentored III ARVN Corps and Military Region 3 territorial forces in both training exercises and major combat operations. An essential effort, the advisor mission enabled South Vietnam to develop the potential to survive by itself.

Each line of effort was not stand-alone product; each one contained offensive, defensive, and stability tasks that affected the other lines of effort. The campaign plan was a living, breathing document; it adjusted to changes in Military Region 3, whether it was enemy activity or to new policy initiatives like Vietnamization.¹⁴⁹ For Vietnamization to succeed in its mission of turning the war over to the South Vietnamese, the other lines of effort had to succeed. The transition is not a quick process; it takes time to properly train and equip a young national military before it can assume security responsibilities. Vietnamization was unsuccessful in Military Region 3 because the U.S. government forced MACV and II Field Force to rush its advisor and combat operations missions. Pacification contributed little to Vietnamization's failure because it virtually destroyed the Viet Cong insurgency by 1971. All that remained of the Viet Cong in 1975 were small guerilla groups that harassed the South Vietnamese rear area during the 1975 PAVN offensive.¹⁵⁰ The quick withdrawal of American combat forces and military advisors left III ARVN Corps without a big brother to provide mentorship.

II Field Force conducted full spectrum operations in Military Region 3 to neutralize the PAVN conventional threat, to destroy the Viet Cong Infrastructure, and to prepare III ARVN Corps to assume security responsibilities. When II Field Force withdrew in May 1971, it

¹⁴⁹ Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), 6-13.

¹⁵⁰ Gates, "People's War in Vietnam," 340-341.

succeeded in stabilizing Military Region 3 so it could withdraw; however, the long-term mission failed because III ARVN Corps eventually collapsed under the weight of a conventional PAVN assault in 1975 because it was unable to function without some form of American assistance.

What can II Field Force teach us about full spectrum operations?

Following its withdrawal, the United States Army struggled to understand what happened in Vietnam and why it happened. As the Army was examining its experiences, events in Israel shaped its doctrine and force structure. With the publication of the 1976 version of FM 100-5 *Operations*, the Army abandoned its Vietnam experience and chose to concentrate on fighting a conventional war against its most likely adversary, the Soviet Army in Europe. The Army rebuilt itself by harkening on the lessons implored by Harry Summers, William DePuy, and others, consciously discarding stability and counterinsurgency operations from its base doctrine.¹⁵¹ When the Cold War ended, stability operations reentered the doctrine's lexicon as Operations Other Than War as it conducted peace enforcement operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. The Army revived the spectrum of conflict and Vietnam's stability lessons when it began counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Vietnam offers more than just counterinsurgency lessons; it provides a plethora of lessons on how to conduct full spectrum operations.

Learn about the operational environment and adjust the plan as needed. While doctrine provides a basis for training, it should not define the operational environment. The converse applies; the environment informs doctrine. Commanders and their staffs have to understand the environment, identify the actors, and know how they interact with each other. Contrary to Nagl's assessment in *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, II Field Force was a learning organization. It used a plethora of authors, the most notable being Douglas Pike, as starting points "to collect, analyze, and disseminate information" on *dau tranh* and the enemy military and political system

¹⁵¹ Doughty, *The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76*, 41-46.

in Military Region 3.¹⁵² Academia provided key insights to the corps' knowledge about MR3, providing concepts and theories that the corps used to develop its campaign plan.

II Field Force used the Area Security System to establish an area defense. It was a significant adjustment. Prior to 1968, the corps used a mobile defense because it did not have enough troops to do anything else. After Tet, it had the combat power to secure critical terrain and infrastructure while also conducting search and destroy operations to locate and eradicate Communist base area. The area defense established conditions for pacification to occur while giving the corps space to interdict Communist lines of communication; counterinsurgency and major combat operations occurred simultaneously.

Doctrine and lessons learned are not universal templates for use everywhere; the concepts need tweaking before application. Loosely derived from the British oil spot concept, II Field Force adjusted the Area Security System to conditions inside MR3. Thirty years later, the Area Security System is in use in Afghanistan as the Afghan Development Zones. While not a direct lift from Vietnam, the Afghan Development Zones are an example of a force adapting concepts to its operational environment. There is no book answer in capturing, planning, and executing lessons learned.

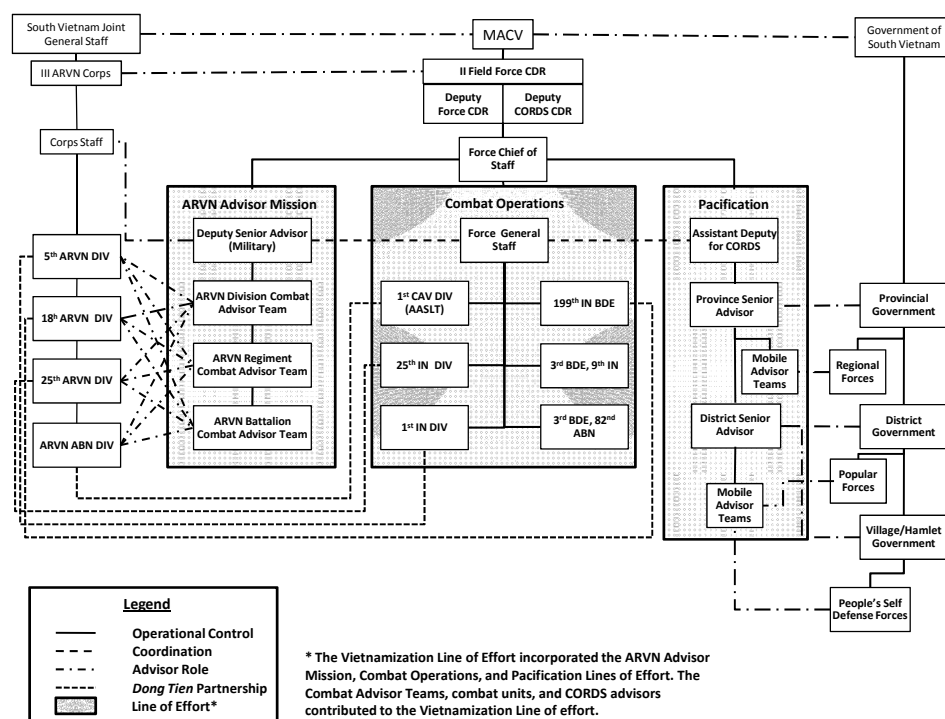
The lessons from Military Region 3 are not just about counterinsurgency; there are lessons on conventional operations. II Field Force fought a conventional war against PAVN, especially in the border provinces occupied by the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) and 25th Infantry Division. The area defense and Cambodian offensive were classic military missions where the corps validated air assault and mechanized concepts, using both extensively throughout MR3.¹⁵³ II Field Force could not consciously ignore PAVN; it was an external threat that could attack en masse whenever it wanted. It was PAVN, not the Viet Cong, which eventually defeated

¹⁵² Davison, "Debriefing Report," 5.

¹⁵³ Doughty, *The Evolution of US Tactical Doctrine*, 35; Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 138-165.

South Vietnam. As the United States Army builds the Iraqi and Afghan Armies, it has to train them to conduct conventional operations against a modern external threat from its neighbors. If a country cannot survive a general war, the fact that it can defeat its internal threats is meaningless because it will cease to exist.

Organize for full spectrum operations. The II Field Force task organization allowed it to conduct full spectrum operations. The corps subdivided into three functional areas: combat divisions, CORDS, and the ARVN Combat Advisor Teams. Each organization had responsibility for a line of effort. The combat divisions had the combat operations line of effort, CORDS was responsible for pacification and the advisors were in charge of the ARVN advisor mission. Together, they implemented the Vietnamization line of effort. Each organization had the capabilities and assets needed to execute tasks associated with its assigned line of effort.



The campaign plan was a combined effort of all three functional areas; they had to coordinate with each other. The American divisions and separate brigades did not have a CORDS team or Combat Advisor Teams assigned to them. Instead, their staffs synchronized combat and

pacification operations with CORDS advisors, ARVN units, and local governments. American combat units did not need CORDS and Combat Advisor Teams assigned to them; the divisions were constantly moving into new areas of operations. The CORDS and ARVN advisor teams did not move; consequently, they were information sources for both American and South Vietnamese military forces about the conditions inside Military Region 3.

Combat operations. American and ARVN combat divisions had the training and capability to conduct combat operations against PAVN. Krepinevich, Nagl and other authors believed that search and destroy missions were wrong for the war; however, these missions were the only successful method that found PAVN caches and infiltration routes. Meanwhile, clear and hold operations cleared areas of Communist military forces, allowing territorial forces to conduct securing missions so pacification could occur. While stability or pacification operations are vital for long-term stability, it is not a substitute for combat operations when a conventional threat exists. American divisions could defeat PAVN on the battlefield, but had limited capability to conduct counterinsurgency and nation building operations. This capability resided in CORDS.

II Field Force combat divisions had the forces to conduct combat operations and support pacification because each brigade had four infantry or armor battalions assigned to it. The divisions could task infantry units to run ARVN training academies, secure CORDS missions, secure key infrastructure, and conduct other missions with minimal impact to projected operations. The plethora of maneuver battalions in each brigade allowed the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) and the 25th Infantry Division to conduct simultaneous operations in both Cambodia and South Vietnam with minimal risk to its rear areas. However, a force relegated to counterinsurgency operations must be ready to transition quickly to combat operations. II Field Force experienced problems in transitioning from counterinsurgency and defensive operations in 1970. The corps worked through these issues and recognized that it was imperative to maintain proficiency in both offensive and defensive tasks, even while conducting stability operations.

Integrate civilian agencies. As a corps-level entity, CORDS was a non-traditional organization not captured in Vietnam-era or current doctrine. Consisting of a mix of civilians and military members, CORDS was the forerunner for the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). CORDS oversaw all aspects of the corps' pacification program and synchronized its efforts with the advisor and combat missions. CORDS ran the II Field Force interagency process by coordinating with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO), and II Field Force.¹⁵⁴ These agencies contributed significantly to the campaign plan by bringing nation building expertise and intelligence capabilities to the Phoenix Program, self-help programs, and government advisor missions that were not organic to the corps. Without outside agency support, II Field Force could not execute full spectrum operations.

Coach, teach, and mentor the host nation security forces and government. The ARVN advisor mission supported stability operations by training South Vietnam to defend itself from external threats, establish civil control over the population, and mentor local administrations to govern the populace.¹⁵⁵ The Combat Advisor Teams are similar to the Military Transition and Embedded Training Teams used in Iraq and Afghanistan. These were separate teams assigned to II Field Force; the divisions did not augment existing CATs with advisors or create additional advisor teams.

To augment the CATs, II Field Force did institute the *Dong Tien* program to train III ARVN Corps, allowing experienced American staffs and commanders to mentor their Vietnamese counterparts. While not called *Dong Tien*, combined operations are occurring today in Iraq and Afghanistan. The same challenges exist today as they did in Vietnam. U.S. units, frustrated by the host nation's lack of technical expertise, can do the planning and execution

¹⁵⁴ Tho, *Pacification*, 56-65.

¹⁵⁵ Department of the Army, FM 3-0, *Operations* (2008), 3-12 – 3-17.

easier themselves. This defeats the purpose of the advisor mission. The indigenous security forces need to learn from their mistakes while the U.S. unit provides tactical oversight to prevent a disaster from occurring. Once the indigenous security forces can function independently, American units can begin to withdraw. According the Deputy Senior Advisor to III ARVN Corps in 1969, “Timing is important in breaking an ARVN unit from *Dong Tien* operations to put them on their own.”¹⁵⁶ Rushing the training and transition jeopardizes long-term security, possibly resulting in defeat once U.S. forces redeploy home.

Can full spectrum operations succeed on the contemporary battlefield?

While this study provides some insights into conducting full spectrum operations at the corps level, it is not complete. Future studies should analyze I Field Force and XXIV Corps operations to discern similarities and differences to II Field Force. Additionally, studying II Field Force’s operations from 1966 to 1969 may shed more light on how the corps adjusted its campaign plan before and after Tet by comparing both Westmoreland’s and Abrams’ approaches. These studies may provide more lessons on full spectrum operations.

II Field Force conducted full spectrum operations; it had only two years to stabilize MR3, train III ARVN Corps, and withdraw. During these two years, the corps held PAVN at bay, permitting pacification and Vietnamization to occur unhindered.¹⁵⁷ As a doctrine, full spectrum operations can succeed on the contemporary battlefield. For it to succeed, the force must be competent and flexible in conducting offensive, defensive, and stability operations. Full spectrum operations are a valid doctrinal concept as long as the nation resources the Army with the men, equipment, funding, and time needed to train and execute the doctrine.

¹⁵⁶ Preer, “Senior Officer Debriefing Report,” 17.

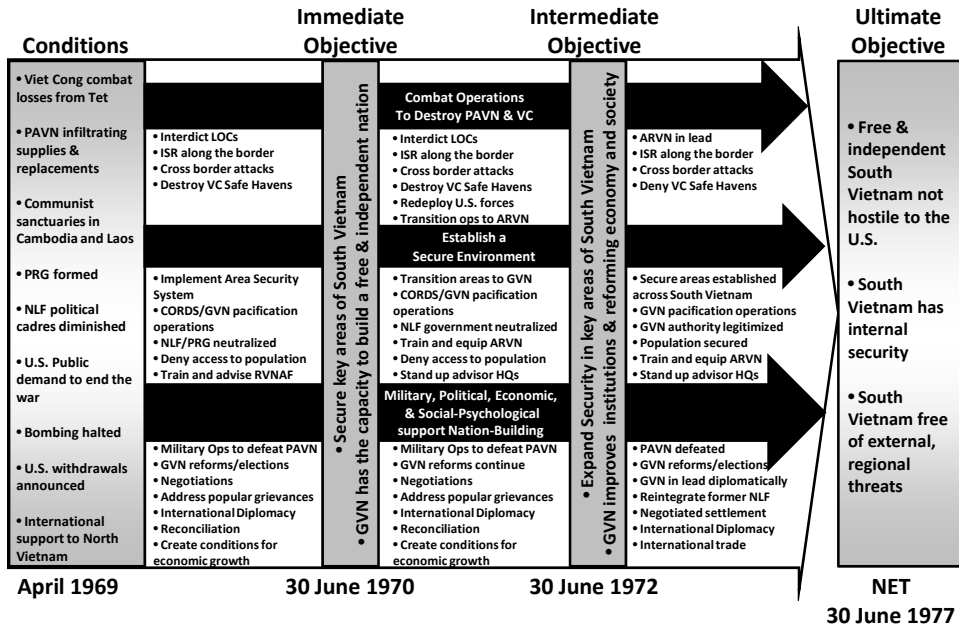
¹⁵⁷ Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 310.

MACV could not translate II Field Force's success into strategic success because the American public tired of protracted war. Full spectrum operations' doctrine does not espouse a quick, decisive victory. It is a time and resource consuming process. The North Vietnamese just waited for the U.S. to depart before returning to a conventional offensive to defeat South Vietnam and unify the nation. The Army has to determine how to conduct full spectrum operations while maintaining support of the American public. Without it, full spectrum operations may fail.

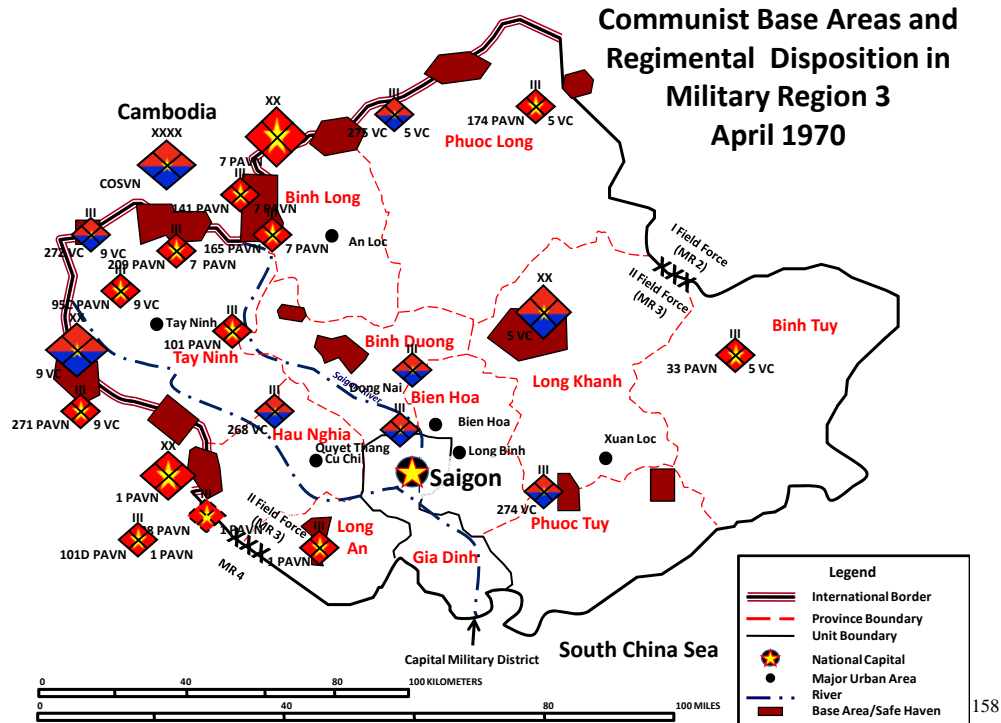
The danger of subscribing to either a Clausewitzian or Hearts-and-Minders version of Vietnam is dangerous. They prescribe a single solution to a complex problem. There is no one solution. A campaign plan uses multiple solutions to address multiple, complex, interrelated problems. As the Army fights in Afghanistan and Iraq, it must maintain the capability to fight different types of conflicts against different opponents. Focusing solely on one threat type endangers the force to succumb to an unexpected adversary much as ARVN did in 1975.

Appendix 1: MACV Strategic Thrusts

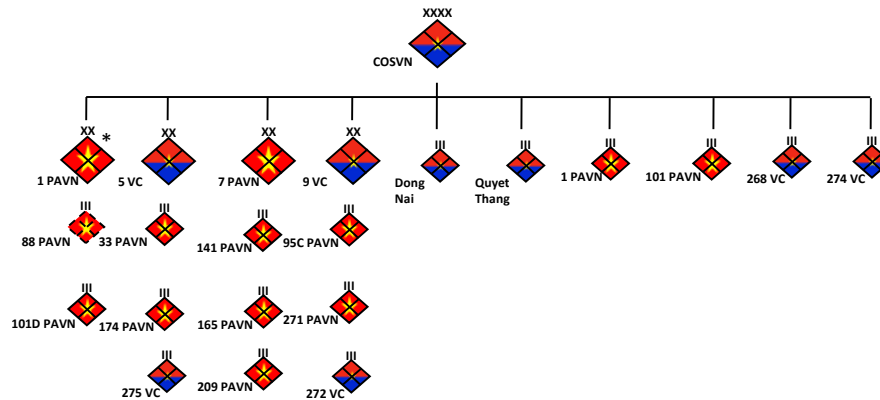
1969 Combined Campaign Plan Strategic Thrusts



Appendix 2: Communist Situation in Military Region 3



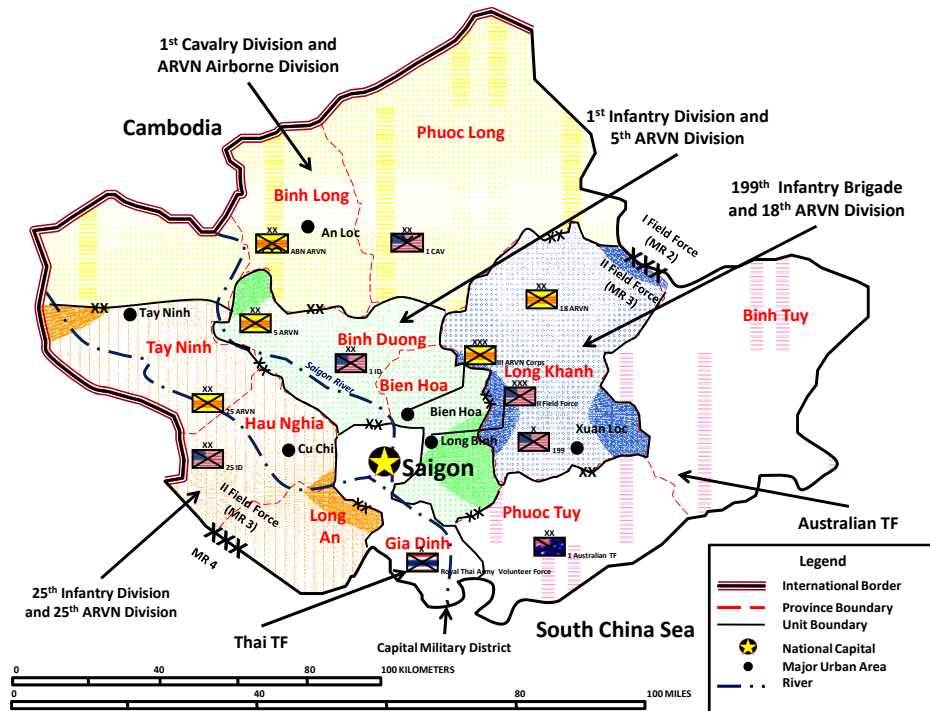
Communist Task Organization in Military Region 3 (April 1970)



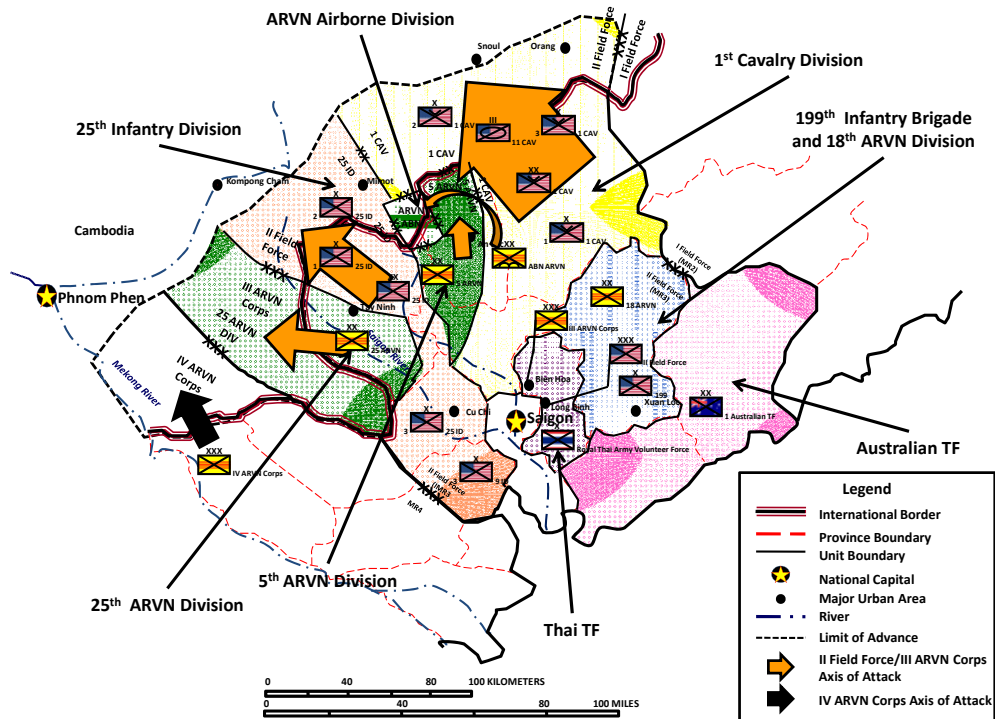
* 1st PAVN Division moved to Military Region 4 in January 1970.

¹⁵⁸ Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 68; Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, *Operational Report – Lessons Learned, Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Period Ending 30 April 1970*, 91.

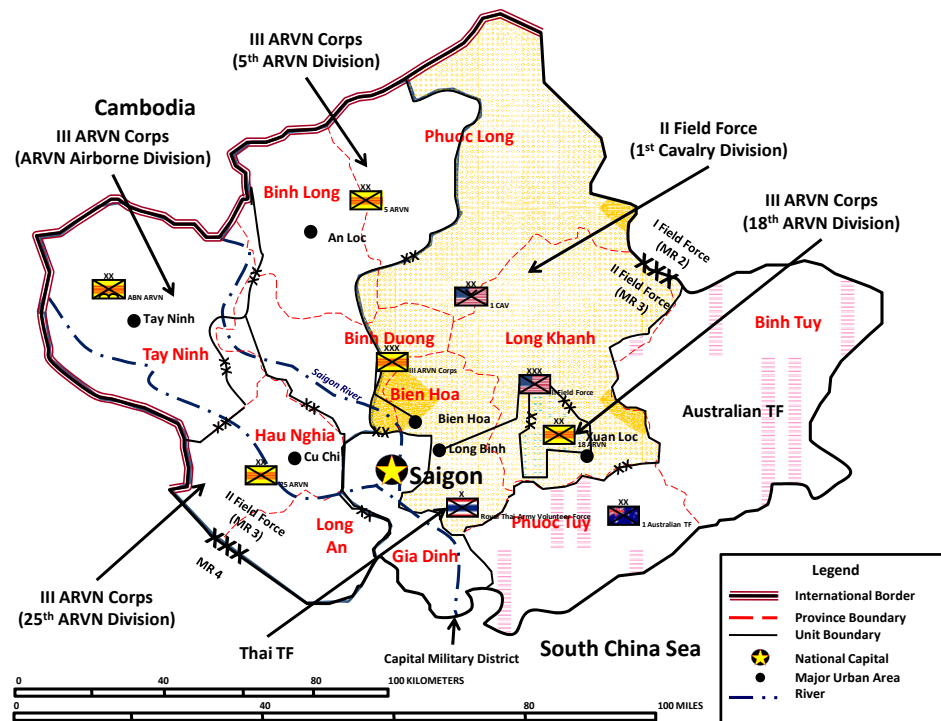
Appendix 3: Military Region 3 Situation, June 1969



Appendix 4: The Cambodian Offensive, April 1970



Appendix 5: Military Region 3 Situation, November 1970



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